

The Politics of Pali Commentary: Canon-making,
Monastic Reform, and Religious Revival in the Mingun
Jetavana Sayadaw's *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*

by

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department for the Study of Religion
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Abstract

Through a contextual reading of the 1949 *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* (*Commentary on the Questions of Milinda*) set against its intertextual and reception history, this dissertation reveals the essential but disruptive role of Pali commentary in the politics of canon-making, monastic reform, and religious revival in twentieth-century Southeast Asia. Published by the Burmese-scholar monk, the Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw (1868-1955), this text caused controversy amongst the monastic elite and Burmese independence government, even though it was composed in a prestige language by a supposedly enlightened being and pioneer of modern *vipassanā* meditation who used psychic and supernatural powers as the epistemological basis of his commentary. By leveraging the uproar around this commentary, my research exposes efforts to create an exclusive, standardized canon to be self-defeating, along with the neoconservative interpretation of Theravada prevalent in Burma for at least two centuries. Drawing from the Pali scriptural and commentarial corpus, Burmese newspapers, monastic biographies, lineage histories, and vernacular meditation manuals, I demonstrate the interconnections between the

formation of an exclusive canon, the rise of a reform movement of lay-meditation, the soteriological transformation of women's role in society, and state attempts to control monastic bodies at the centre of Burmese post-colonial nation-building. While I begin with the question of what made this text so contentious, this question allows me to articulate the nature of a "modern" Pali commentary, to rearticulate the distinction between the religious and the secular in the social function of commentary, and to deconstruct the ultraorthodox, literalist assumptions of contemporary Burmese Theravada. Though my aim is to inject a philological perspective into debates on the relationship between religion and politics, foreground for Buddhist Studies the role of meditation in exegetical practice, and argue for the importance of the *abhiññās* in twentieth-century Burma, my most resounding insight is that the recursive power of commentary is an effervescent and enduring force in Theravada civilizations, a power on which monastic courts, lay-monastic economies, gender equality, control of the *saṅgha*, and canon-making all rely—and upon which they all may fail. For a commentary does not simply define words but unleashes the sociopolitical act of meaning-making on which communal life is built.

Acknowledgments

It is a rare opportunity among many lifetimes to have the chance to work for almost a decade on a project that is equal parts humbling, empowering, frustrating, and exhilarating, a project that brings one into contact with so many incredible individuals around the world, that allows one to turn friends into colleagues and colleagues into friends, which allows for moments of both intellectual and moral growth, and which at the end leaves one speechless, even after writing what seems like far too much. This PhD is one such project, and despite all the struggles, late nights, moments of doubt, and sacrifices, there were even more moments of joy, relief, accomplishment, and thrill. It has truly been a highlight of my life to be able to work on this material in this place with such an inspired and inspiring group of mentors and colleagues.

The anchor and driving force behind this project for the last nine years has been my fearless and indefatigable supervisor, Christoph Emmrich. From our very first meeting he listened to my aspirations as an emerging scholar and took my interests to heart, skillfully directing me towards a project that would not only complement my strengths and feed my passions but would also compel me to grow and adapt as a researcher. I will be always grateful that he directed me towards the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*. Throughout my time under his charge, the force of his cosmopolitan vision exposed me, a provincial child of the badlands of Alberta, to new horizons of human thought and creativity, new vistas of intellectual endeavor and pursuit. His special ability as a supervisor was in keeping the larger goals and aims of my work always in view while making sure I was meticulous in my writing and research, showing how these two aspects of scholarship should function together. During the many peaks and valleys of this project he was ever generous with his patience, time, and understanding, never failed to combine his feedback with warmth and encouragement, and always had an eye for my future success and wellbeing. It has been a unique privilege to work under him these past many years and it is my sincere hope that I can become half the scholar he is. Even more, I hope to pay forward all his efforts by guiding my own students one day, using my experience with Christoph as a model for how to open up new and exciting worlds of thought, language, and culture for those who come after. If I am ever trapped in a cathedral basement for all eternity after renegeing on a Faustian bargain with Mephistopheles, he would be the one person I would trust to curate my reading list for salvation.

My other pillar of support and inspiration during this project has been Alicia Turner, who from our first meeting put me at ease with her kindness and encouragement, but also held out the terribly exciting promise of taking my research into new directions that I had not thought possible, reaching out to different audiences, and asking questions that had never occurred to me. Along with Christoph, she was a constant companion in my research and writing process, with her probing and sweeping questions, both stated and implied, constantly driving me forward and challenging me to see the material in a new light. There are many parts of this dissertation which are extended responses to her, as she was always encouraging me to further contextualize, widen the scope of my vision, consider the conversations between different figures and overlapping historical periods, and distil what was at stake in the controversy around the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*. She is a generous and selfless mentor to many emerging scholars in her many fields, and I feel very fortunate that she freely gave me so much of her time and attention. Like

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Though they wish to remain anonymous, there is another dear friend and colleague whom I must acknowledge. This scholar was a companion and collaborator during my time in Burma, learning together with me about the legacy of the Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw while we uncovered the amazing life he led and his contribution to Burmese Theravada Buddhism. A brilliant scholar far more talented than I can ever hope to be, this colleague shared with me sources critical for my research, suggested helpful revisions to my translations, and was always prepared to answer my questions as best they could. My wife and I shared many formative moments together with this colleague, experiences that were some of the highlights of my doctoral program. The three of us became lifelong friends beyond this one project. This individual is a steadfast source of support and inspiration whom I admire greatly for their principles and courage, and I only hope that I can be the same source of support and solidarity for them one day, whenever they are in need.

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List of Conventions

1. Geographic Names

One finds either “Burma” or “Myanmar” as the proper noun used to describe the country in question here. “Burma” is the name adopted by the British imperial government and is still widely used in Europe and North America. In 1989, the military government officially changed the country’s name to “Myanmar,” an appellation used by most of its citizens, and which is more common in contemporary Asia. Deciding which name to use is politically charged, with the former associated with imperial discourses or the pro-democracy movement, while the latter is often associated with the military regime and its sympathizers. It is not my intention to make a political statement of my own, yet since most of my discussion is limited to the period before the name change in 1989, I will use “Burma” throughout this dissertation. By avoiding “Myanmar,” I will not project more recent developments onto the past; this also means, unfortunately, that in the very few instances where I do speak of the present, I will also use “Burma” and thus superimpose this older name on the present. But by using a single term, rather than something like “Burma/Myanmar,” I also hope to minimize confusion for the reader.

2. Foreign Words, Terms, and Names

This dissertation invokes the linguistic and cultural worlds of classical Pali and vernacular Burmese, worlds which overlap but are not always co-extensive. Since one part of my audience consists of Buddhist Studies and Pali Studies scholars not familiar with Burmese, I have decided to foreground Pali spelling, pronunciation, and conceptual terms. In most cases, the Pali word will be preferred to English translations when describing ideas or terms originally deriving from Pali texts and which are used consistently throughout this dissertation, with an initial English translation given in parentheses in the first usage, or in a second instance if the word is being reintroduced in a much later point. Pali words will be transliterated according to the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration. When I wish to offer the Pali translation of a specific English word or phrase, a “P” within parentheses will be used, except when found in a running translation of a Pali text. Vernacular Burmese is also an important component of this dissertation. Recognizing the many problems with different systems of transliteration, when using Burmese words and

names, I will usually first provide their transliterated form, followed by Burmese letters in parentheses, and sometimes their translation in English also in parentheses. My hope is that this system will make the dissertation more accessible for both non-specialists and readers of Burmese. In my transliteration of Burmese terms, I will follow the simplified system of Christian Lammerts and Arlo Griffiths (2016), which does not capture the way words are pronounced but does ensure more accurate spelling so that others can recreate the original Burmese. An exception will be made for Burmese names that are either commonly known by a different transliteration system, usually one more faithful to the vernacular pronunciation, or Romanized names of authors provided by the authors themselves, such as in the many dissertations I use. I will also refrain from instituting my transliteration method in quotes taken from other sources. For longer quotes that I have translated myself, the Burmese will be provided in a footnote, foregoing any transliteration system.

3. The “Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw” and other Honorifics

The Burmese word “sayadaw” is an honorific title literally meaning either “royal teacher” or “holy teacher.” Gustaaf Houtman suggests that this title was popularized during the time of King Mindon and eventually became the moniker for “monks who are either over 10 years in monkhood, or are in charge of their own monasteries, in which case, it can be interpreted to mean simply ‘abbot’” (Houtman 1990b, 278). Since this title is very common for monastics in Burma, it will be dropped in this dissertation after its first usage, but “Mingun” is a Burmese toponymical title which refers to the name of a place in Sagaing Township on the west bank of the Ayeyarwady River across from Mandalay. “Jetavana” is a Pali toponym that describes “Jeta’s grove” where the Buddha was said to have resided for long periods of time during his lifetime, and is usually associated with more isolated, forest monasteries further from urban centers. In this case, “Jetavana” is an important identifying marker in the name of the monastery in the town of Mingun over which the Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw presided, hence it is necessary to use these two titles in combination to signal the specific monk being referenced here, especially because there is another, more famous monk known simply as the “Mingun Sayadaw” who was junior to the Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw. The ordination name of the Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw, “Ūḥ Nārada,” is also unsuitable for this dissertation, since it is much more common and does not signal the high status afforded this individual. As “Mingun Jetavana” is a title, it will be used together with its article, in the

same way one would use “the” for “the Archbishop of Canterbury.” I will follow the same practice for other monks when referring to them by their titles, as opposed to their ordination names, unless they are not usually referred to by titles, such as in the case of Ashin Ādiccavaṃsa. In this case, “ashin,” which is a common honorific name for monks largely regardless of status, will also be dropped, and the ordination name will be used on its own.

4. Naming Conventions of the *Milindapañha*/*Milindapañhā*

As Sodō Mori points out (1998), there are at least three forms for the title of this text found in printed editions and manuscripts, with the most common in modern editions being the stem form in the masculine, the *Milindapañha*. Peter Skilling explains how the title *Milindapañhā*, with the long-ā, is most common in the Thai recensions, which could be either nominative, masculine plural or nominative, feminine singular (Skilling 2010, 5). Eng Jin Ooi confirms that for the Burmese manuscripts he has surveyed, the title with the long-ā is also found, “roughly” concluding, based on these and two Laotian manuscripts, that “the long ‘ā’ form is a common feature in the mainland of South-East Asia especially in the Tai speaking region” (Eng Jin Ooi 2021, 103). For my own part, I will use the signum Mil for the root text and Mil-a when referring to its commentary in the body of my text, but in the case of chapter titles and section headings, I will follow the convention of modern printed editions and use *Milindapañha* in the masculine stem form but will follow the Mingun Jetavana’s lead and use the long-ā form for the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*. (I will also use a signum for the *Visuddhimagga*, the *Peṭakopadesa*, the *Peṭakopadesa-aṭṭhakathā*, and the *Nettipakaraṇa* after their first appearance.) This strategy both follows the convention of philological study while also signalling that there is diversity in the textual recensions and commentarial constellation around the Mil. For more on this issue of variations in the spelling of the root text, see Mori (1998, 291 fn. 1) and Eng Jin Ooi (2021, 100–105).

5. Translations and Page Numbers

Unless otherwise stated or indicated, all translations are my own. For ease of reference, all page numbers to the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* refer to Madhav Deshpande’s 1999 edition, while page numbers for all other Pali texts are to the Pali Text Society’s edition, unless indicated otherwise.

Abbreviations

A	<i>Āṅguttaranikāya</i>
Ari	<i>Ariyāvāsa ta rāḥ tau</i> (အရိယာဝါသ တရားတော်) [<i>Discourse on the Ariyāvāsa</i>]
As	<i>Atthasālinī</i>
B ^e	Burmese edition
Bio	<i>Buddhamataññu—aṭṭhakathā kyamaḥ pru kyeh jūḥ rhañ—mūla mañḥ kvanḥ Jetavan cha rā tau bhū rāḥ krīḥ *e theruppetti</i> (ဗုဒ္ဓမတညု—အဋ္ဌကထာကျမ်းပြု ကျေးဇူးရှင်-မူလမင်းကွန်း ဇေတဝန် ဆရာတော် ဘုရားကြီး၏ ထေရုပ္ပတ္တိ) [<i>One Who Knows the Intention of the Buddha—Benefactor [Who] Composed Commentar[ies]—Biography of the Most Venerable Mūla Mingun Jetavan Sayādawgyi: A Pāli Commentator</i>]
Bu	<i>Bhikkhunī Sāsanopadesa</i> (ဘိက္ခုနီ သာသနောပဒေသ) [<i>Instruction on the Sāsana of Nuns</i>]
Cone	<i>A Dictionary of Pāli</i>
CPD	<i>Critical Pali Dictionary</i>
D	<i>Dīghanikāya</i>
Dhp-a	<i>Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā</i>
Dīp	<i>Dīpavaṃsa</i>
DPPN	<i>Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names</i>
GPC	<i>Mhan nanḥ mahārāja wañ tau krīḥ</i> (မှန်နန်းမဟာရာဇဝင်တော်ကြီး) [<i>The Large Royal Chronicle of Great Kings of the Glass Hall</i>]
It	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
M	<i>Majjhimanikāya</i>
MAA	<i>Mran mā-aṅga lip abhidhān</i> (မြန်မာ-အင်္ဂလိပ် အဘိဓာန်) [<i>Myanmar-English Dictionary</i>]
MBTD	<i>Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines</i>
MEED	<i>Buddhabhāsa vohāra mran mā-aṅga lip cvay cuṃ abhidhān</i> (ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာ ဝေါဟာရ မြန်မာ-အင်္ဂလိပ် စွယ်စုံ အဘိဓာန်) [<i>Myanmar-English Encyclopedic Dictionary of Buddhist Terms</i>]
Meth	<i>Vipassanā lamḥ ññhvan kyamaḥ</i> (ဝိပဿနာလမ်းညွှန်ကျမ်း) [<i>Treatise on the Method of Vipassanā</i>]
Mil	<i>Milindapañha</i>

Mil-a	<i>Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā</i>
Mil-n	<i>Milindapañha-nissaya</i>
Mil-ṭ	<i>Milindapañha-ṭīkā</i>
Mp	<i>Manorathapūraṇi</i>
MW	<i>A Sanskrit-English Dictionary</i>
Nett	<i>Nettipakarāṇa</i>
Nibb-k	<i>Nibbāna-kathā</i> (နိဗ္ဗာန်ကထာ) [<i>Discourse on Nibbāna</i>]
Nibb-l	<i>Nibbān lamḥ ññvan</i> (နိဗ္ဗာန်လမ်းညွှန်) [<i>Guide to Nibbāna</i>]
Nyāyak	<i>Nyāyakośa</i>
Paṭṭh	<i>Paṭṭhāna</i>
Paṭṭh-d	<i>Paṭṭhānuddesa-dīpanī</i> (ပဏ္ဍနုဒ္ဒေသဒီပနီ)
PEG	<i>A Pali-English Glossary of Buddhist Technical Terms</i>
PED	<i>Pali-English Dictionary</i>
Peṭ	<i>Peṭakopadesa</i>
Peṭ-a	<i>Peṭakopadesa-aṭṭhakathā</i>
Pj	<i>Paramatthajotikā</i>
PMA	<i>Pāli-Mran mā abhidhān</i> (ပါဠိ-မြန်မာအဘိဓာန်) [<i>Pāli-Burmese Dictionary</i>]
PMED	<i>A Pali-Myanmar-English Dictionary of the Noble Words of the Lord Buddha</i>
Saddh-rtn	<i>Saddharma Ratnāvaliya</i>
S	<i>Samyuttanikāya</i>
Sās	<i>Sāsanavaṃsa</i>
Sp	<i>Samantapāsādikā</i>
Sv	<i>Sumaṅgalavilāsinī</i>
Sv-nṭ B ^e	<i>Sumaṅgalavilāsinī-navaṭīkā</i>
Sv-ṭ	<i>Sumaṅgalavilāsinī-ṭīkā</i>
Th-a	<i>Theragāthā-aṭṭhakathā</i>
Thi	<i>Theelone Sayadaw (1786 AD-1861 AD): A Great Meditation Master in Old Burma</i>
TPMA	<i>Tipiṭaka pāli-mran mā abhidhān</i> (တိပိဋက ပါဠိ-မြန်မာအဘိဓာန် <i>The Tipiṭaka Pali-Myanmar Dictionary</i>)
Vibh	<i>Vibhaṅga</i>
Vin	<i>Vinayaṭiṭaka</i>

Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>
VyY	<i>Vyākhyāyukti</i>
Whitney	<i>The Roots, Verb-Forms and Primary Derivatives of the Sanskrit Language</i>

Introduction: The Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw and the Ethics of Subcommentary

Dramatically embodying the nature of impermanence and decay which their author so assiduously preached, hundreds of unread books scramble over one another in teetering stacks in a locked room at a busy meditation centre and monastic complex in contemporary Burma, melting in the heat and humidity, assailed by insects, and enveloped by decades of dust. These texts were written by the Burmese monk, the Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw (မင်းကွန်းဇေတဝန်ဆရာတော် Maṅḥ kvaṅḥ jetavan Cha rā tau, a.k.a., ဦးနုရဒ ။ nārada, 1868-1955; hereafter, the Mingun Jetavana), a national figure in the mid-twentieth century who was central to the rise of the modern reform movement of *vipassanā* (“insight”) meditation. Given a traditional monastic education in the Mandalay area and becoming an accomplished scholar in his own right, the Mingun Jetavana was considered an enlightened being of the twentieth century by many in Burma, including by some government officials in the first independence administration of Prime Minister U Nu (ဦးနု: ။ nuḥ, 1907-1995). Through his most famous disciple, the Mahasi Sayadaw (မဟာစည်ဆရာတော် Mahācaññ Cha rā tau, a.k.a., ဦးသောဘန ။ Sobhana, 1904-1982; henceforth the Mahasi), and many other students, the Mingun Jetavana’s method of meditation spread throughout the country, to other nations in South and Southeast Asia, and throughout the world. Just before his death, many national dignitaries travelled to Thaton, Mon State, to pay their respects, including U Nu and his ministers (Tikkhācāra [1957] 1959, 140). At the Mingun Jetavana’s funeral, to which the government and other wealthy individuals made considerable financial contributions, the same dignitaries came, hoping to behold his body to verify whether he was in fact an enlightened being (Tikkhācāra [1957] 1959, 165–66). The author of 25 books, the Mingun Jetavana also contributed to the formation of the

genre of the vernacular meditation manual as it is understood today, with his works being widely circulated and read throughout Burma. Why then, after achieving such fame and prestige, at a time when *vipassanā* meditation was culturally and politically ascendent across Burma, were the Mingun Jetavana's books locked away and left to the ravages of time over these last seven decades? This question is the entry point of all that follows, a question that indicts the practice of Pali commentary, *vipassanā* meditation, the role of women in Buddhist history, and the sealing of the Pali canon in mid-twentieth-century Burma.

The Mingun Jetavana

To answer this question, we must first outline the life and repertoire of the Mingun Jetavana himself. Widely considered an *arahant* (ရဟန္တာ *rahanta*) of the twentieth century—one who has reached the highest stage on the Theravada path to *nibbāna* (S. *nirvāṇa*)—the Mingun Jetavana is an important but enigmatic figure in the history of twentieth-century Burmese Buddhism. As a pioneer of one of the major lineages of Burmese *vipassanā*, which Kate Crosby describes as a “modernised reform method of meditation” (Crosby 2013, 12), he was responsible in part for liberalizing contemplative practices traditionally seen as the vocation of virtuoso male monastics, making them accessible in the local vernacular for un-ordained women and men. At the same time, he based his “reform method” in Pali canonical texts like the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (*The Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness*), the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (*Path of Analytical Knowledge*), and the later *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of Purification*) of the fourth to fifth-century C.E. commentator Buddhaghosa, reflecting a “preoccupation with origins” which effectively functioned to “obscure previous [vernacular] literature” on meditation (Skilton,

Crosby, and Pyi Phyo Kyaw 2019, 4).¹ Aside from the Mingun Jetavana’s technique, which came to be known as the “*satipaṭṭhāna* method” in his lifetime (Cañ rhanḥ 1954, 14), perhaps his greatest legacy was the establishment of the first-known meditation centre in Burma in 1911 (Houtman 1990b, 2), a place to which “all the people wishing to attain [nirvana] would be warmly welcome[d] [...] to practice *vipassanā*” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 47). Indeed, the concept of the meditation centre was arguably the key institutional driver of the mass lay meditation movement in twentieth-century Burma,² since it allowed for monastics and lay people to practice together in the same space according to roughly the same technique. While there were likely sites used for various forms of practice inside monasteries or other places in the centuries before,³ the centre established by the Mingun Jetavana was unique as a non-monastic site dedicated to the intense practice of *vipassanā*, where lay women and men could assume the role of quasi-monastics alongside monks, supported by donations and without the supposedly burdensome responsibilities of domestic life to distract from their vocation.

While the Mingun Jetavana’s own network of meditation centres flourished in Burma, reaching 105 affiliated sites by 1959 (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 127–28), it was the constellation of centres by arguably his most prominent student, the Mahasi mentioned above,

¹ The “previous [vernacular] literature” that Crosby et al have in mind concerns the forms of meditation they refer to collectively as *boran kammaṭṭhāna*, or “old-style meditation,” which is based on Abhidhamma theory but also has tantric-like characteristics borrowed from generative grammar, pre-modern obstetrics, and Ayurvedic notions of the body. Unlike *vipassanā*, where the goal is more to transform the mind or mental landscape of the practitioner, *borān kammaṭṭhāna* seeks to transform the whole body of the individual to resemble the enlightened body of the Buddha.

² I am grateful to Ryosuke Kuramoto for pointing out the importance of the meditation centre in the revival of *vipassanā* meditation in Burma, personal communication, March 2020.

³ In his biography of the Thilone Sayadaw, for example, Htay Hlaing mentions that the teacher of the Thilone Sayadaw, Kingtawya Sayadaw, directed criticism at certain “places[...] which conducted meditation retreat, [...] object[ing] to some rules there because they were against the Dhamma” (Thilone trans. Hla Myat Thu 2013, 14). This fleeting comment indicates that there were meditation retreats as far back as the eighteenth century, but without the exact location being stipulated, one must assume they were on monastic grounds or setup temporarily.

that truly spread the *satipaṭṭhāna* method among what Ingrid Jordt calls the “New Laity” (2005, 62), of which women made up the most dedicated and proficient part. One Burmese newspaper article from 1954 describes the centres overseen by the Mahasi as “the fruits, tendrils, and the branches coming from” the Mingun Jetavana (Cam rhanḥ 1954, 14). The primary meditation centre in this network, known today as the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha (မဟာစည်သာသနာရိပ်သာ *mahācaññ sāsana rip thā*), was built on land donated by the wealthy merchant Sir U Thwin (ဆာဦးသွင် Chā Ūḥ svañ, 1878-1966m hereafter U Thwin) in September 1949, with the Mahasi being personally invited to take up the role as teacher by Prime Minister U Nu in November of 1949 (Tin Than Myint 2008, 41).⁴ U Nu is said to not have taken this decision before first consulting the Mingun Jetavana, even asking the elder monk if he would take up the post himself. The Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha and its affiliated satellite sites were a major plank of U Nu’s “Buddhist Revival” program, which sought not only to reinforce Buddhist institutions after more than 60 years of imperial occupation by an alien power hostile or indifferent to Buddhism (Mendelson 1975, 263), but to morally prepare the citizenry to fully participate in democratic society. Drawing largely from the urban middle-class, it has become “a socially recognized and accepted orthodox assertion” that potentially “millions” of practitioners have achieved the higher stages of *vipassanā* practice at the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha since its founding (Jordt 2005, 48). The Mingun Jetavana’s meditation method and his innovation in the site of practice were both the efficient and formal causes of this socially transformative phenomenon.

⁴ The Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha was set up not by the government directly but by a “para-government” organization, the Buddha Sasana Nuggaha (ဗုဒ္ဓသာသနာနဂ္ဂဟ *buddha sāsana nuggaha*), which included among its members Prime Minister U Nu.

In addition to his innovations in the sphere of religious practice (P. *paṭipatti*), the Mingun Jetavana also broke new ground in the sphere of scriptural learning (P. *pariyatti*). Like his popularization of the meditation centre, the Mingun Jetavana was a pioneer in creating a new genre of text, the meditation manual. Given the monastic “control over the manuscript economy” before the advent of print in Burma in the middle of the 19th century (Emmrich 2021, 14), and with the more devotional and formalized ways people interacted with texts in manuscript cultures, the concept of a “do-it-yourself” meditation manual was most likely quite foreign before the late nineteenth century. With meditation mostly occurring in monastic settings, the main vehicle for its transmission was through teacher-student instruction (P. *ācariya-laddha-upadesa*), especially considering the background knowledge needed to understand many of the terms and concepts involved in meditation and the fact that contemplative practice was known to have adverse side effects if undertaken without proper supervision.⁵ This paradigm began to change with the rise of the mass lay meditation movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with people like the Mohnyin Sayadaw (မိုယ်းညှင်းဆရာတော် Muiyḥ ññhaṅḥ Cha rā tau, 1872-1964, hereafter the Mohnyin) (Tin Than Myint 2008, ix) and the Mingun Jetavana producing texts meant for people to follow and practice meditation on their own. The role of the meditation centre ensured that the student-teacher relationship was not altogether absent from this process, but this emerging genre of texts, like the Mingun Jetavana’s 1922 *Nibbān lamḥ ññvan* (နိဗ္ဗာန်လမ်းညွှန် *Guide to Nibbāna*) ([1922] 1973), combined both theoretical

⁵ For example, the first Theravāda meditation text published in roman script, Thomas William Rhys Davids’ *The Yogāvacara’s Manual* (1896), was not so much a “manual” that one could follow on their own, but a condensed outline of the practice meant to accompany one’s apprenticeship under a qualified teacher who could explain the cryptic symbolism of the text which people like Rhys Davids and subsequent scholars struggled to decipher without such a background.

exegesis and step-by-step instructions for practicing meditation.⁶ One of the critical factors in the success of such texts was in presenting teachings about meditation taken from Pali sources in easily accessible vernacular Burmese, making them available to any literate person in Burma, man or woman.

The Mingun Jetavana was not just known as a writer of “popular” meditation texts, but as an accomplished Pali scholar who has been referred to by Htay Hlaing, a biographer of Burmese monks writing in the early 1960s, as an “unknown *tipiṭakadhara*” (လူမသိသော တိပိဋကဓရ ဆရာတော်ပါပေ *lū ma si so tipiṭakadhara cha rā tau pā pe*) (Theḥ lhuin [1961] 1993, 448), one who had memorised and could recite by heart the Tipiṭaka, the collection of “three baskets” that defines the traditional contours of the Pali canon. The Mingun Jetavana’s scholastic work on Pali canonical and commentarial texts included many “judgement” texts (P. *vinicchaya*) on the Vinayapiṭaka, one of the baskets of the Tipiṭaka that consists of the code of monastic conduct, and he was known by Htay Hlaing’s informants as being very strict in *vinaya* matters, even when it came to the monks in his meditation centres (Theḥ lhuin [1961] 1993, 451). Indeed, according to his first biography from 1957, the Mingun Jetavana demanded that any monk who enters his regime of *vipassanā* practice must have memorized the monastic code (P. *pātimokkha*, S. *pratimokṣa*) for both *bhikkhus* (“monks”) and *bhikkhunīs* (“nuns”), “understanding them comprehensively” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 110). This emphasis on memorizing and

⁶ While the Ledi Sayadaw is often credited in North America and Europe as being the founder of lay-centered *vipassanā* meditation, Braun himself admits that the “Ledi spent so much time promoting study groups but did much less to organize explicit meditation practice in a group setting” (Braun 2013, 144). Likewise, the Ledi’s numerous texts on meditation “are not, in the main, practical guides,” but are more scholastic and theoretical in nature (Braun 2013, 88). In this sense, the Mingun Jetavana and others might be better seen as developing the infrastructural aspect underlying the mass lay-meditation movement, though the Mingun Jetavana also had his own unique doctrinal interpretations.

understanding the *bhikkhunī-pātimokkha* (“monastic code for nuns”) by the Mingun Jetavana stands in contrast to the current state-sponsored examination syllabus for semi-monastic *thilashins* (သီလရှင် *sīla rhaṅ*, “keepers of the precepts”) in Burma, non-ordained female renunciants who instead of studying the Vinayapiṭaka, are tested on the *Sukumāramaggadīpanī* (*Manual of the Path for the Delicate*) at the primary, or “root level” (မူလတန်း *mūla tanḥ*),⁷ and the *Dhammapada* (*Verses on the Dhamma*) at subsequent levels (Saruya 2020, 158–59). As Rachelle Saruya points out, the former text was originally written “as a *vinaya* for the youth” (Saruya 2020, 159), testifying to the ambiguous status given to *thilashins* by the monastic establishment and government of Burma.

Arguably the Mingun Jetavana’s most consequential contribution to *pariyatti* in Burma was his composition of two full Pali commentaries, which he published as *aṭṭhakathās*, the most intimate exegetical genre to the Tipiṭaka and thus the most authoritative in Theravada literary history. Assigning his two commentaries the name “*aṭṭhakathā*” was a rather audacious move given the textually conservative, scripturalist nature of Burmese Buddhism since at least the time of King Bodawpaya (ဘိုးတော်ဘုရားမင်း *Bhuiḥ tau bhu rāḥ maṅḥ*, r. 1782-1819) (Pranke 2008, 1), and while his first such commentary, the *Peṭakopadesa-aṭṭhakathā* (*Commentary on the Disclosure of the Canon*, hereafter Peṭ-a) from 1926 was relatively uncontroversial and mostly relegated to elite scholarly circles, his second, the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* (*Commentary on the Questions of Milinda*, hereafter Mil-a) created an uproar among the monastic elite and forced the U Nu administration to intervene and confiscate several hundred copies of the text (Bha rī

⁷ Rachelle Saruya explains that the *Sukumāramaggadīpanī* is a “short text of 86 pages and outlines basic rules and regulations” for non-ordained Buddhists in Pali with glosses in Burmese, and includes recitations, devotional formulas, wish verses, and so on (Saruya 2020, 159).

Ukkatṭha 1949, 15; Bollée 1968, 315; Huxley 2001, 134). Started around 1938, finished in 1941, but not published until early 1949 (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 84), the Mil-a is perhaps the first-known commentary of its type composed for the *Milindapañhā* (*Questions of Milinda*, hereafter Mil), which features a fictional dialogue—encyclopaedic in scope—between a Greek-Bactrian monarch and South Asian monk. The controversy over the commentary, which is well documented in newspapers of the time and apparently even spurred the government to introduce legislation in response (Huxley 2001, 134), was over two contentious issues: calls by the Mingun Jetavana to reform the robe-giving ceremony (P. *kaṭhina-kamma*), a major component of monk-lay relations in Burma, and his promotion of the full ordination of women as nuns (P. *bhikkhunī-upasampadā*). Madhav Deshpande also mentions these controversies in his ground-breaking introduction to his transliteration of the Mil-a (Deshpande 1999, 8–13). According to the most immediate interpretation, then, it was because of these two reforms promoted by the Mingun Jetavana in his Mil-a and the controversy they instigated that led to hundreds of his books being ostracized and locked away in the monastic meditation centre. The controversy that ensued over the Mil-a involved the top of the monastic hierarchy and reached the upper echelons of the Burmese government. Case closed then, correct? Not exactly, for the question now becomes why a commentary, set to explain a more than two-millennia-old text, written in a prestige language which most people could not understand, couched in a medieval and foundational genre of Pali scholasticism, and composed by a nationally revered monk at the base of the modern, reform movement of *vipassanā*, caused such widespread controversy and provoked such a vehement backlash by the state and monastic elite? The stakes have been raised considerably by this expanded question, while the potential answers will reveal a great deal about the political impact of Pali commentary in state-monastic relations, the changing gender dynamics of mid-century,

and the maintenance or destabilization of the ultraorthodox, neoconservative interpretation of the Tipiṭaka in Burma.

Who, which, where, what, and how?

The first step towards providing such revealing answers is to isolate the actual components of this multipronged question, or rather, nested set of questions. In essence, these components consist of who was writing, what were his claims, how did he justify these claims, when did he publish, and on which text did he comment? In order to come to a comprehensive understanding of the controversy around the Mil-a and its wider significance for Burmese monastic scholarship, cosmological concepts of Buddhist history, gender relations and soteriology, and Buddhist biopolitics,⁸ all five of these components will be addressed in the course of this dissertation. Of the two reforms promoted by the Mingun Jetavana in his text, that of changes to the *kaṭhina-kamma* and the call to reinstate the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha* (“order of nuns”), the latter is the most instructive, since it best captures the five components of my primary research question and exemplifies the multiple threads coursing through the dissertation. Compared to the reform of the *kaṭhina-kamma*, which is highly technical and pedantic, revolves around the interpretation of two or three key words in a ceremonial formula, and actually consists of several smaller and obscure

⁸ My intent in using this term “biopolitics” is to signal the kind of work I see commentary doing in the larger project of U Nu’s Buddhist revival in post-colonial Burma, which I more fully unpack in Chapter Nine. The idea I am trying to signal with this concept is that when trying to control the individual bodies of monks through legislation that necessarily targets them as a population, U Nu was practicing a type of biopolitics through his monastic courts system, in which commentary was the animating force. Commentary is important in exercising this biopolitical form of control because it provides a very fine resolution on the actions and behaviors of a given individual within the larger community, such that one’s forms of speech, modes of dress, or bodily actions are scrutinized, with the proper form or type of behavior being stipulated in a legal setting where offenders are punished not just by their fellow monastics, but by government agents and apparatuses. For more on how I see this term applying to the Mil-a, see Chapter Nine and the Conclusion.

points of contention, the attempt to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* demonstrates the epistemology of the Mingun Jetavana's commentary, involves his larger project of *vipassanā* meditation, directly invokes the *Milindapañhā* on which the commentary revolves, and represents the Mingun Jetavana's greater vision for the history and future of Theravada Buddhism in Burma. Hence the call to reintroduce the higher ordination (P. *upasampadā*) for women in the Mil-a will be the primary case study used to understand and unravel the controversy over this text, with this issue serving as the climax of the dissertation as a whole. As such, I will leave the issue of the *kaṭhina-kamma* in the Mil-a for another time or researcher.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Mingun Jetavana's call to reintroduce the *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* is that while he grounds his argument in the texts of the Tipiṭaka, his interpretation of these texts is supported by his own special access to the intentions of the Buddha when the latter was laying down the rules for *bhikkhunīs* in the Vinayaṭiṭaka. We have already seen above how the status of the Mingun Jetavana as a supposedly living *arahant* was part of his monastic persona on the national stage, and this topic will be further explored in Chapter Five. Along with his role as a founding figure in modern, reform *vipassanā*, the topic of Chapter Four, the Mingun Jetavana's special status is part of the answer as to who was writing the commentary, and how the identity of the commentator factored into and sparked its attendant controversy. Yet to appreciate the nature of his argument for reinstating the *bhikkhunī-upasampadā*, it is also crucial to understand the role of the *abhiññās* ("higher forms of knowledge") in the Mingun Jetavana's commentary and conception of Buddhist history, or what we may call the *sāsana*.⁹ Forms of psychic and supernatural power, these *abhiññās* are usually

⁹ According to Juliane Schober and Steven Collins, the Pali word *sāsana* "can refer to a body of ideas (and texts) which claim to convey the Buddha's teaching outside of any historical or material embodiment" (Schober and

associated with the practice of calming, or *samatha* meditation, not *vipassanā*. But as we will see in Chapter Six and Chapter Seven, these *abhiññās* were a fundamental part of both the Mingun Jetavana’s practice lineage before and after him, as well as providing an epistemological basis for his commentarial method. Hence, the *abhiññās* constitute a major part of the answer as to the way in which the Mingun Jetavana justified the claims made in the Mil-a, but they are not exhaustive in this sense. We must also understand the type of commentary the Mingun Jetavana composed, the *aṭṭhakathā* genre, the topic of Chapter Two and Chapter Three. In these chapters, we will discuss the commentarial strategies in the Pali commentarial project and how the Mingun Jetavana used these strategies to both lend his text legitimacy, but also to innovate as a commentator and inject new ideas into Theravada orthodoxy.

That leaves us with two more components to cover, the nature of the root text on which the Mingun Jetavana commented, and the historical moment in which he published. These two components of my driving research question cannot be separated, for in Chapter One, we will examine the ways in which the Mil’s canonical status was negotiated in the Fifth and Sixth Councils in Burma, the first held under the auspices of the penultimate Konbaung king, and the second during the Parliamentary period. During its almost two millennia of circulation and adaptation in Pali literary history, the Mil has had an ambiguous relationship to the centre of the

Collins 2018, 6), which we might call an “idealist” connotation of this word. While this idealized sense is accurate, the *sāsana* also has a less abstract connotation as “a bounded entity” that “continues its existence in time,” both as an “ideology” but also in the form of relics, monasteries, stupas, even in the form of monks and nuns (Schober and Collins 2018, 6). Hence *sāsana* is both an ideal captured by the Buddha’s “timeless” teachings, but also a type of instantiation and institutionalization of these teachings in texts, the *saṅgha*, and in the network of buildings and offerings that support the *saṅgha*. While Schober and Collins contrast *sāsana* with *vamsa*, the latter being closer to what we mean by the word “history,” in this dissertation, I use *sāsana* to encompass both the ideal of the Buddha’s teachings, its intertextual and monastic life, as well as the unfolding of this ideal in abstract and embodied form over historical time and in different places. This broadening of the term might not completely align itself with every specific emic instance of its use, but perhaps better captures the fuller range of its deployment, thereby conveying the ways discourse about the *sāsana* motivate and have been mobilized by different religious, social, and political actors in Theravada Buddhist civilizations.

Tipiṭaka, and this ambiguity ran directly into the project to transform the more porous and inclusive Tipiṭaka into an exclusive and standardized canon, a project that was reinforced with the Fifth Council and cemented in the Sixth Council. While its place as the last text of the last collection in the discourses of the Suttapiṭaka was officially recognized, unlike almost all the other texts in the concept of the exclusive canon then emerging, it was without an *aṭṭhakathā* of its own, a fact which the Mingun Jetavana exploited to write his Mil-a. In this sense, the nature of the root text, and its uneasy status within the emerging exclusive canon, was an efficient cause for the controversy around the Mingun Jetavana's commentary. Finally, we come to the question of "when," which is an element running through the entire dissertation but the primary focus of Chapter Nine. The project to create an exclusive canon was one part of a larger program by the U Nu administration to "revive" Buddhism after 60 years of rule by an alien power, the transformation of society into a capitalist state from the monarchy to the village head, and a devastating world war fought on Burmese soil. This Buddhist Revival program included the Sixth Council, legislation to set up a monastic courts system, the establishment of a Ministry of Religious Affairs, the national registration of monks and *thilashins*, a Pali education system, and the patronage of a system of lay meditation centres meant to improve the moral "hygiene" of the population. It was, in essence, a Buddhist biopolitical project, one where the Mingun Jetavana's modern reform method of *vipassanā* was at the centre. The problem for the U Nu administration, however, was that while it was supplicating the Mingun Jetavana and his students for this system of *vipassanā* meditation centres, his Mil-a, with its calls to reinstate the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, its assertive invocation of the *abhiññās*, and its claim to be an *aṭṭhakathā* on a canonical text, ran counter to the aims of standardizing and sealing the Pali canon as an exclusive set of texts. In this

way, the timing of the publication of the Mil-a was perhaps just as critical in the controversy it created as the actual content of the text.

Therefore, a more comprehensive answer to the question of why the Mil-a was so controversial involves the combination of these five different components: the status of the Mingun Jetavana as an enlightened being and teacher of *vipassanā*, the nature of the Mil and the means by which its canonical status has been contested and negotiated since the late nineteenth century, the way the *abhiññās* are used in the text and in society to index the state of *sāsana* history, and the socio-political developments at the moment of this commentary's publication in 1949. Such are the multiple threads of inquiry that this work will pursue, and when juxtaposed against one another, they lead to a fertile new set of questions. For once the controversy of the Mil-a is understood in all its different dimensions, we are able to ask whether the Mingun Jetavana's text is a premodern or modern commentary, how does a Pali commentary function in the political and bureaucratic systems created by the independence state to control the *saṅgha*,¹⁰ the order of monks, and what does this commentary reveal about the nature of the neoconservative, scripturalist brand of Theravada Buddhism predominant in Burma over the last two centuries and which relies on the exclusive canon reinforced by the Fifth and Sixth Councils? Each level of research questions motivating this dissertation raises the stakes even further, bringing into relief the recursive power of commentary in the politics of canon-making.

¹⁰ The Pali word "*saṅgha*" refers to those members of the Buddhist community that both purvey and practice the Buddha's teaching in an attempt to realize the *dhamma* in themselves and on behalf society. As we will see in Chapter Eight, the range of "*saṅgha*" is denoted differently according to the cultural or linguistic register being considered and is currently challenged by elements of the modern, reform movement of *vipassanā*, but it always includes monastics, the vanguard of the Buddhist community.

Aim and Structure of this Dissertation

Indeed, the purpose of this dissertation is to describe the recursive power of commentary as a potent and essential force in the politics of canon-making, a task undertaken in Burma during the Konbaung dynasty but reanimated in the post-colonial, Parliamentary period. It is widely recognized that religious commentary has been a driver of intellectual development in South and Southeast Asia for over two millennia, mediating how generations of scholars, practitioners, ritualists, donors, and devotees have interacted with the corpus of their most sacred and authoritative texts. Paul Dundas emphasizes this point by writing that “the extent to which religions as encountered today should be deemed as being the product not so much of their scriptures as of their adherents' exegetical activities” (Dundas 1996, 91). In the case of Theravada Buddhism, Toshiichi Endo argues that this school can be best understood as “the Buddhism that Buddhaghosa upheld,” given the role this classic commentator and his legacy played in standardizing the Theravada’s doctrinal system and neutralizing dissenting voices and opinions (Endo 2013, 190). While the monopoly of commentary over the systematization and articulation of religious ideas was broken with the advent of new forms of critical scholarship and expression since the colonial encounter in Asia, if not before, the thrust of my research is that commentary still serves an integral function in how the state seeks to control and regulate the ideas and behaviors of religious specialists, especially Buddhist monks in Southeast Asia. By examining the controversy of the Mil-a, its historical context, and the broader Buddhist ethos that the work is responding to, my research reveals that commentary is crucial in the functioning of Buddhist biopolitics in Burma in the mid-twentieth century, rebuilding after six decades of colonial rule according to the principles of a modern nation state.

My point is not so much that the Mil-a was central to the project to cement an exclusive, standardized canon, but that it proved a counter-narrative and disruptive force to this project, thereby demonstrating the decisive role commentary played in the religious infrastructure being built. The concept of the exclusive canon was but one part of the Buddhist Revival program of the U Nu administration, along with a monastic court and a Pali education and exam system. By examining the reasons behind the controversy over the Mil-a, it becomes clear that commentary was fundamental to the Buddhist Revival program as a whole. For commentary is how a corpus of sacred texts becomes activated through the power of definition. This definition is what is then used by a monastic elite supported by the state to demarcate the boundaries of “orthodox” thought and behavior. But commentaries, through their inherent ability to generate more commentaries, also have the potential to proliferate an unpredictable series of definitional dispatches, engendering the very social act of meaning-making by commentary that drove the intellectual development of religious thought over the last two millennia in Asia. My research is thus an examination of such a process manifest in the Mil-a, a process which this dissertation participates in and drives forward as a postmodern type of subcommentary itself.

In order to examine the recursive power and process of commentary exemplified by the Mil-a, this dissertation is divided into three parts of three chapters each. Part I begins with a chapter focused on the root text of the Mingun Jetavana’s commentary, the Mil. My intention in this chapter is to trace how the Mil became the last “brick in the wall” of the Pali canon as it was standardized and sealed through the Fifth and Sixth Councils. The project to create an exclusive canon from a more porous Tipiṭaka began at least during the Konbaung dynasty (1752-1885),¹¹

¹¹ Christian Lammerts provides evidence of disputes over the nature and content of the Tipiṭaka as far back as the late-seventeenth century under King Minye Kyaw Htin (r. 1673-1698), who in a royal order explains that some texts

was reinforced in the Fifth Council under King Mindon (မင်းတုန်းမင်း: Mañḥ tunḥ mañḥ, r. 1853-1878), and reached a crescendo under the independence administration of U Nu. As the last text to be added to the Suttapiṭaka, the Mil played a critical part in this process. The discussion of this chapter is meant to demonstrate the ways the canonical status of an ambiguous text like the Mil was contested, negotiated, and formalized over the last two centuries in Burma, setting the tone of what follows by linking Pali literature and politics. Such background on the root text also puts us in a position to introduce and outline the Mil-a more fully in Chapter Two, where I contextualize the Mil-a as the latest installment in the intertextual history of the Mil, which also includes a *Milinda-ṭīkā* and *Milinda-nissaya*. The goal of Chapter Two is to show not only how the Pali commentarial project developed in the second millennium of Southeast Asia, but how the lack of a previous *aṭṭhakathā* for the Mil enabled the Mingun Jetavana to innovate with his own installment situated in the line of Pali commentaries. Yet the innovations of the Mingun Jetavana were not in spite of the conventions of the Pali commentarial project but because of them. These conventions are covered in Chapter Three and introduced as a set of six strategies that constitute the task or responsibility of a commentator working on texts of the Tipiṭaka, taken by tradition to be the products of the Buddha’s enlightened mind. Across these six strategies

in the Tipiṭaka contain “the words of the Buddha, the words of *pacceka* buddhas, the words of *arahants*, as well as treatises written by deities and seers, and by unenlightened masters (*puṭhujjān si khaṇ*)” (D. Christian Lammerts 2018, 137–38). This royal order also emphasizes that there is considerable “disagreement” over the criteria used to include this range of texts in the Tipiṭaka, especially since “for some texts authorial attributions are not given” (D. Christian Lammerts 2018, 138). Lammerts highlights that in the premodern bibliographies of the Tipiṭaka he surveyed, “kings and other elite donors, not monks themselves, were usually the individuals who expressed anxieties over the shape of their *tipiṭakas*” (D. Christian Lammerts 2018, 19), which leads him at the end of his monograph to conclude that “the perception of *piṭakat*-compliance meant a great deal to lay patrons, perhaps to royal patrons in particular, and thus to the monastics who sought their patronage” (D. Christian Lammerts 2018, 177). Whether the efforts by the U Nu administration are also part of this longer-term trend is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but suffice to say that what U Nu was attempting to accomplish was not necessarily unprecedented in Burmese history, but rather, that he had new mechanisms at his disposal to carry out his project, including print technology, international networks, and most crucially for this discussion, the apparatuses of a modern nation state and all its bureaucratic mechanisms, which lead to a perhaps unprecedented sealing of the exclusive canon that could then serve a pivotal role in an attendant set of laws and monastic courts in the decades to come.

there is a spectrum, from forging connections between different texts, to forging connections between the text and the social act of meaning-making. This spectrum, however, is not terminal, but is an iterative yet non-repeating process of reinterpreting and reconfiguring a root text for the changing historical conditions of new audiences in doctrinal, social, and even political paradigms different from when the root text was first laid down. Hence the overall thrust of Part I is to bring us from a focus on the root text, to the Pali commentarial project, to the world outside the Mil-a, thereby setting up Part II, which covers the social context and historical ethos in which the Mingun Jetavana was writing his commentary.

This expansive Buddhist ethos is the framing device for Part II and involves first and foremost the Mingun Jetavana's role as a foundational figure in the modern reform movement of *vipassanā* in Burma, the topic of Chapter Four. I argue in this chapter that it is impossible to make sense of the long digressions in the Mil-a without this background in mind, because such digressions often involve meditation theory and practice, which the Mingun Jetavana takes to be the essence of the *dhamma*. The Mingun Jetavana's reduction of the complexities of Theravada Buddhism to the practice of *vipassanā* meditation clearly influenced his commentarial approach to the Mil, as the Mingun Jetavana was using not just the six strategies of commentary outlined in Chapter Three, but the deeper logic of commentary as found in the *Peṭakopadesa* (*Disclosure of the Piṭaka*, hereafter Pet) and the *Nettipakarāṇa* (*Guiding Treatise*, hereafter Nett), two other texts added to the Suttapiṭaka in Burma. Likewise, it is impossible to understand the Mingun Jetavana's exegetical methodology without realizing that for him, the composition of commentary was a type of contemplative practice itself, a claim I put forth in Chapter Five. When seen as a form of contemplative practice, the claim by his disciples and devotees that the Mingun Jetavana composed the first *aṭṭhakathā* in perhaps a millennium becomes an integral

aspect of the narratives of enlightenment that surround him. By examining such narratives in Chapter Five, the identity of the Mingun Jetavana is recognized as a contested site, upon which the decision to accept or reject the claims of the Mil-a hinge. For whether one believes the Mingun Jetavana was an *arahant* or not partly determines how one assesses the controversy over his commentary, linking the soteriological status of the commentator and the controversy over his commentary. The Mingun Jetavana's soteriological status is also used as a measure of the longevity and vitality of the Buddha's teachings in contemporary times, the focus of Chapter Six. Moving away from a direct engagement with the person of Mingun Jetavana, in this chapter I explore anecdotes of the *abhiññās* in his practice lineage. Stories involving the *abhiññās* in the nineteenth and twentieth century embody the widespread anxieties about the Buddha's teachings at this time, an age thought to represent a stage of advanced decline in the Buddha's dispensation some two and half millennia after his *parinibbāna* ("complete nirvana"). The role of the *abhiññās* as an index of the vitality of the Buddha's dispensation is crucial to grasp here, because it is with the *abhiññās* that the Mingun Jetavana starts his Mil-a, which he claims in both a subtle and aggressive way are possible, even despite the current age of decline. Hence in Part II we use the person of the Mingun Jetavana and his lineage to introduce the role of the *abhiññās* that become so crucial in the following two chapters.

If Part II is an attempt to introduce the different threads and themes that course through and contextualize the Mil-a and the life of its author, Part III is an attempt to actually weave these seemingly disparate threads and themes together. My aim is to distill what was at stake not just for the Mingun Jetavana in his commentary, but for Burmese society more broadly in terms of the epistemology of Pali commentary, the changing soteriological possibilities of gender, and the Buddhist biopolitics of the U Nu administration. The first chapter of Part III, and the seventh

overall, picks up on the role of the *abhiññās*, demonstrating how, in the first chapter of his commentary, the Mingun Jetavana uses them to form the epistemological basis of his commentary. I argue in Chapter Seven that the possibility and play of the *abhiññās* in his commentary allow the Mingun Jetavana to radically transform his relationship to both physical space and time, thereby creating a new model and mode of *sāsana* history. It is this new model and mode that the Mingun Jetavana amplifies and leverages in his call to reinstate the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, the topic of Chapter Eight. Perhaps the Mingun Jetavana's most provocative reform, the case made for the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in the Mil-a demonstrates the *abhiññās* in action, specifically, the knowledge of the future (P. *anāgatam̐sa-ñāṇa*). I show in this chapter how the *anāgatam̐sa-ñāṇa* operates in the Mil-a through an invocation of a sort of inverse prolepsis, where the Mingun Jetavana reverse engineers the Buddha's reasons for laying down rules in the Vinayaṭṭaka. However, coming back to the role of *vipassanā* in the commentary and the debate about the vitality of the Buddha's teachings and institutions, I argue that part of the Mingun Jetavana's reason for promoting such a reform is because in the Mingun Jetavana's system of meditation, women are capable of reaching the ultimate goal, thereby necessitating an official pathway for their higher ordination. This rationale for the Mingun Jetavana becomes clear when his reforms are compared with those of Ashin Ādiccavaṃsa (အရှင်အာဒိစ္စဝံသ Arhañ ādiccavaṃsa, 1882-1951), who advocated for re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in the 1930s. In Chapter Nine and the last of Part III, I further flesh out the historical and political stakes by reviewing the reception of the commentary and the controversies thereof in the public sphere. These controversies played out in many of the leading periodicals of that time, several examples of which I discuss in this chapter. A central theme of Chapter Nine is that the controversy around the Mil-a must be understood against the background of the Buddhist Revival program and the

attendant policies of the first independence administration, bringing the dissertation back full circle to the Six Council and the project to cement an exclusive canon *de jure*, a set of texts that can be used as a legal mechanism to adjudicate orthodox and unorthodox doctrine and discipline.

Significance and Approach of What Follows

In the study of medieval Buddhist commentaries in South and Southeast Asia, the historical context of the commentator and their work is not usually foregrounded. Indeed, as Jonardon Ganeri highlights, these commentaries “where shorn *by their own authors* of almost all significant autobiographical, social, or political context, a fact which suggests that such details would be a distraction from the intended illocutionary act” (Ganeri 2011, 66) (*italics in original*). Put another way, for these medieval commentaries, “the tradition, rather than a single ‘author,’ is paramount” (Shaw 2013, 424). The character of Buddhaghosa, for example, who “wrote” several *aṭṭhakathā* texts sometime between “370 to 450 C.E.” (von Hinüber 2000, 103), has been thoroughly deconstructed, with his commentaries now treated as the product of a committee of translators, scribes, researchers, and protégés, or rather, the “School of Buddhaghosa,” as L.S Cousins has phrased it (Cousins 2013, 390). This act of deconstruction is more historically accurate given the complexity of writing commentary and the substantial infrastructure required for such an endeavor,¹² especially medieval *aṭṭhakathā*, but the individuality of the nominal

¹² One example of such an infrastructure is discussed by Srilata Raman (2006), who explains that in the 12th century C.E., during the reign on Rājarāja I, there was a rise of a veritable “temple economy” in the Cōḷa Empire in the southeastern part of the South Asian subcontinent. Raman argues that the rise of this temple economy both enabled and was enabled by the rise of new Tamil saints, new texts, and relevant for our purposes, new genres of commentary (Raman 2006, 58–59). Although outside the Buddhist and Burmese context, such evidence of a causal connection between economic infrastructure, religious adepts, and commentarial forms shows that composing commentary is a process embedded and dependent upon more than just an individual author at a spontaneous historical moment. From this case, it can be suggested that medieval and premodern commentary required extensive political patronage and economic resources, not just because of the lack of print technology, but because of the level

author has been neglected or diffused as a result. Part of the reason for this neglect has to do with the dearth of historical evidence from the first millennium C.E. Very little is actually known about the “person” of Buddhaghosa (von Hinüber 2013, 354), that is, little that would meet the academic level of historiography or reliable biography.¹³ This fact forces current researchers to rely primarily on philological and text-historical analysis, restricting the type of research questions asked and the perspectives valued in the field.

Another aspect of this tendency to overlook the life of the “author” in the field of Pali Studies is the limitation of the concept itself. An author is usually considered as someone who writes and composes a text “*de novo*” from out of their own individual genius (Cousins 2013, 391). Most medieval Pali texts, especially commentaries, do not display this definition of authorship. In comparing the two most researched medieval commentators, Buddhaghosa and the later Dhammapāla, Oskar von Hinüber understands them more as “redactors” who weave their own voices into intertextual “masses” that combine root material and the commentarial traditions they inherited (von Hinüber 2013, 376). As redactors, these exegetes go “beyond textual criticism” to understand the history of the texts themselves (von Hinüber 2013, 377), that is, the stratigraphic layering of material within texts over time and their levels of superposition relative to the supposed origins in the person of the Buddha. The role of editor is also applicable, as von Hinüber suggests, since confusion and ambiguity at the level of semantics, syntax, and theory need to be excised to maintain the integrity of the canon as a whole (von Hinüber 2013, 376). On

of scholarship required and the research networks needed to compose commentaries on extensive bodies of sacred texts.

¹³ For example, the *Buddhaghosuppatti (Origins of Buddhaghosa)* is perhaps more a hagiography than an historical account. According to Oskar von Hinüber, it also comes from a much later date, possibly the 15th century, and is “sometimes ascribed to the Burmese [monk] Mahāmaṅgala” (von Hinüber 2000, 102), which also displaces it geographically from the life of Buddhaghosa.

a concrete level, the commentators need to make explicit the intertextuality of the corpus by providing “cross-references” and “gloss[ing] earlier references to the older commentaries with specific references to the extant Pali commentaries” (Cousins 2013, 394). On an abstract level, Buddhaghosa, Dhammapāla, and their “committees” used their commentaries to provide a “systematic survey of the orthodox teachings not contradicting the interpretation of the learned monks of the [Theravāda]” (von Hinüber 2013, 354). In this sense, the author of a religious commentary or subcommentary does not wish to draw attention to herself, since “it is the tradition, not variation within it that is the primary aim” (Shaw 2013, 425).

However, this way of approaching commentary is not entirely appropriate nor necessary for the Mil-a, given the role of the Mingun Jetavana in his text and textual communities. In this dissertation, I will thus follow the advice of Alastair Minnis, scholar of medieval European exegesis, who, “in defiance of [Roland] Barthes’ dismissal of our hopes of divining authorial intention, [...] argues we *should* always try and find what the author was actually trying to do, either through the way [the text] is framed and patterned, by inference from comments or salient asides within the text, or through statements made by the author or authors involved” (Shaw 2013, 427). Published in 1949, the Mil-a enjoys a wealth of historical and biographical context, thus the intention of the author can be partially induced directly from the text, but also indirectly, from other texts and statements of the Mingun Jetavana, from his biographies, and by the reaction and opposition to his work. This context will be distilled and presented over the coming chapters through allusions and evidence found in newspapers, biographies, and meditation manuals, but also through an analysis of discourses in Burmese society before and after the Mil-a was published in 1949. With this context and history in hand, it might be possible to ascertain the *intention* behind this commentary, if one considers “intention less as a psychological state of

mind and more as an emergent social process, an irreducible unity of self in action with others, and a matter of negotiated social meaning” (Heim 2014, 33). The key to Maria Heim’s insight here is that commentary is the eminent forum for negotiating “social meaning” of scripture in the public sphere, with the Mingun Jetavana’s intention playing an integral part in this negotiating process. This observation suggests that doctrinally defining a word is distinct yet inseparable from the political life and social circulation of that word. Hence commenting on a text is also a social act, one with far reaching consequences outside of any given intertextual nexus.

With this holistic wealth of data about the Mingun Jetavana, a central contribution of this present study is to probe the ways in which the Mil-a, even though it is written in a prestige language and in a medieval genre, can be considered a modern commentary, if at all. The question is not one of periodization, but concerns whether this commentary reproduces the techniques and methods of premodern exegesis, or whether it embodies something unique about modernity in the context of Buddhist scholasticism. Academic debates on what constitutes modernity, the modern, or the contemporary in Buddhist Studies have been overly determined by the type of evidence used in the discussion, which has been mostly anthropological and historical in nature (Emmrich 2018, 87). With the Mil-a, I am attempting to shift the parameters of this debate by injecting into the discussion a philological and exegetical dimension focused on the production of a contemporary Pali text. My philological intervention is timely because the field of Pali Studies has in the last two decades been extracting itself from “a conceit of antiquity,” in which older texts were valorized as more authentic and original, while texts of a more recent provenance were denigrated as corruptions or simply curiosities with only local relevance (Skilling 2014, 364). Such a conceit led to what Skilling calls a “pervasive conviction that Pali literature [wa]s already well known, that almost all the important texts ha[d] already been edited

and translated, and that there [wa]s not much left to do except to translate *Aṭṭhakathās* or edit and translate *Ṭīkāś*” (Skilling 2014, 364). According to this conviction, a twentieth-century text like the Mil-a was not considered fit for academic study. Deshpande was thus well ahead of his time in recognizing the importance of the Mil-a when he edited and transliterated it in 1999, especially because its recent age, non-normative and possibly spoken style of Pali, and its courting of controversy render it an “improper” Pali text in a conservative reading of philology. I have thus taken up Deshpande’s call to place this text at the centre of my research, with the aim of reorientating the study of modernity to how a commentary reinvents the text on which it is explicating while asserting its own voice and vision for that text and broader religious histories.

Since the Mil has only been canonized in Burma relatively recently, my research leads from insights about commentary to insights about the canon. For if a commentary can be modern, can a canon be modern also? The question is partly one of semantics, for in the Pali tradition, the set of authoritative texts believed to reflect the words of the Buddha and his immediate disciples is known as the “Tipiṭaka” (“three baskets”), whereas scholars in Religious and Buddhist Studies prefer to discuss these authoritative texts through the framework of a “canon.” My own research combines these two perspectives by identifying the processes by which a more porous collection of texts represented by the word “Tipiṭaka” came to be standardized and sealed by the state in Burma, a process of reinforcing the functional concept of an “exclusive canon” which started at least two centuries ago and which continues up to today every time there is a new printing run of the Sixth Council edition of texts or the addition of a new volume to the *Tipiṭaka pāli-mran mā abhidhān* (တိပိဋက ပါဠိ-မြန်မာအဘိဓာန် *The Tipiṭaka Pali-Burmese Dictionary*). These Buddhist Councils have captured the imagination of Buddhist Studies scholars since the field’s inception, while the Sixth Council has been the object of

several studies in its own right (see Mendelson 1975; Myat Myat Htun 2006; Nyein Chan Maung 2006; Frasch 2014; Clark 2015). This last set of studies has laid the groundwork to investigate the functional concept of an exclusive canon envisioned by the Sixth Council project. One of the contributions of my own research is in elucidating the means by which the status of the Mil was negotiated in this canon-making project, demonstrating how the exclusive canon was sealed by this liminal Pali text. But more importantly, by tracing how the Mil-a both participated in and countered this project, I am able to uncover the operative role commentary has played in the functioning of the exclusive canon and the biopolitical program which relies on it, and in the case of the Mil-a, the way that commentary can also disrupt this same program and cause it to unravel.

By thus placing commentary at the centre of my research, I join with scholarship that understands commentaries in Theravada Buddhism “as independent and primary source-material and not as secondary or supplementary sources for the reading of the *Tipiṭaka*” (Endo 2013, 9). With this approach, I understand commentary as the primary method by which the concept of the exclusive canon is *actualized* in a given historical period, local region, cultural context, and social world. As George Bond explains, by concentrating on the role of the commentaries in *actualizing* the Tipiṭaka, or in the case of twentieth-century Burma, in enacting and interpreting the exclusive canon, we come to see the Pali texts making up this canon in their “life-setting” (Bond 1982, 206). What foregrounding commentary does in my research, therefore, is participate in the work of moving the field beyond or at least supplementing the idea of a Pali imaginaire, where Pali texts become, in the words of Alastair Gornall, purely “intellectual resource independent of the historical Buddhist tradition” (Gornall 2020, 10). This is not to say that a Pali text like the Mil, for example, was not an integral part of a more abstract cultural system that

existed to a degree across different regional and linguistic boundaries, as a resource for writing and thinking about the values, concepts, and symbols of Theravada Buddhism. Indeed, these Pali texts and the Pali language as a universalized linguistic register were integral to creating the self-conscious category of “Theravada” itself. But when we reify these Pali texts and the Pali language as “ideas,” we fail to see how they respond to the shifting conditions of bounded regions, to changing epistemological regimes, and to the unfolding political economy of knowledge production. On their own, Pali texts as literary ideas cannot tell us very much about such conditions outside their hypostatized cultural systems, which is why the mediating role of commentaries is key to historicizing such texts.

Hence along with seeing commentaries as resources for reading the Tipitaka, they are also expressions of “agency in history that allowed individuals to actively and purposefully change and reshape their already existing circumstances” (Gornall 2020, 11). This historical agency is exactly what we see in the case of the Mil-a, and even though the Mingun Jetavana is not making any overtly political claims in his text, couching his reforms in the orthodox language of soteriology and his own schema of Buddhism’s decline instead, this apparent aloofness is the source of his political impact. The final insight of this dissertation, then, is to demonstrate that a commentary like the Mil-a is political due to its very ability to appear apolitical. This counterintuitive observation derives from the fact that when someone like the Mingun Jetavana is seen in the public sphere as operating beyond the venial and worldly realm (*P. lokiya*) of human failings, power, and survival, either as an accomplished scholar, a living *arahant*, or as a founding figure in the modern *vipassanā* movement, this persona bestows a measure of authority and legitimacy on his words and proclamations. In the case of the Mingun Jetavana and his widely accepted status as a living *arahant*, his legitimacy is even more

pronounced, for an “*arahant* is understood to be disinterested and detached from any worldly concerns, and thus represents the highest level of moral perfection for a human being that is beyond any implication of power or its application” (Kawanami 2009, 224). This kind of power, according to Hiroko Kawanami, is not coercive or top-down, captured in the Burmese word “*āṇā*” (အာဏာ)¹⁴ but rather is denoted by the word “*ojā*” (ဝိဇ္ဇာ)¹⁵ which represents the “authority [derived] from the reverential and moral influence monks are able to exert over the general public” (Kawanami 2009, 222–23). It is this second kind of authority that manifests in the form of a commentary, but commentary is also amenable to be used as a tool in the exercise of *ana* embodied in the exclusive canon. When used in this way, a commentary is the means by which someone without *awza* polices behavior and doctrinal innovations, put restrictions on the economic or social activities of monks, or forces them to disrobe in extreme cases. In a sense, then, commentary is a site where *ojā* is reserved and then transformed into *āṇā*, which represents

¹⁴ A Pali word meaning “order, command, authority,” which in practice usually means meting out punishment or sentencing an individual to death (CPD, s.v. *āṇā*). Hence this form of power functions not through seeking consent among equals, but through the fear of or concrete implementation of corporeal punishment. Qualities of respect, obligation, or loyalty are absent in this form of power or, perhaps more appropriately, are corollaries of the potential or actual use of force. Houtman defines this form of power as impersonal, therefore manifesting through institutions, above all, in the military (Houtman 1999, 60). There is, however, the concept of the “wheel of *āṇā*” that, according to Houtman, “arises only as the result of correct mental states and intentionality” of a ruler or king (Houtman 1999, 168), but even in the case of this “wheel of *āṇā*,” it is still exercised in a top-down way through force, though it might be justified through recourse to such “correct mental states and intentionality.”

¹⁵ This term is also from Pali, where it means “nutritive essence, vitality,” or “lex, splendor, strength” (CPD, s.v. *ojā*). The combination of these two senses, that of “vitality” and “splendor” comes closer to its meaning in Burmese, which might be approximated by the idea of charisma. Hence Houtman considers the exercise of *ojā* as occurring in the sphere of influence that emanates from an individual as opposed to the institutions at an individual’s command (Houtman 1999, 65). As such, *ojā* is not centralized, but “distributive,” working its way through network and person-to-person interactions (Houtman 1999, 161). In contrast to *āṇā*, which has its force from fear, *ojā* “means an authority which is both regarded positively and influential” (Houtman 1999, 168), and hence a more sincere loyalty and obligation develop towards someone seen to wield this form of power. When recalling its underlying Pali meaning of “vitality” or “nutritive essence,” it becomes clear that *ojā* cannot be totally separate from the idea of *bhunḥ* (ဘုဏ်), a type of “glory” possessed by men that comes from accumulated wholesome karmic action and the spiritual fruit that results. Indeed, the distinctions made between *ojā*, *āṇā*, and *bhunḥ*, are helpful as heuristic devices, but in practice they work in tandem, through or in contrast to one another.

the force “closest to the Western notion of political power that is inherently secular” and is exercised via institutions (Kawanami 2009, 222). Given this mediating role, the ability of commentary to appear as though it transcends the political is where its historical agency is derived, which in turn affords people the right to deploy commentary to intervene in worldly affairs and perform the social act of meaning-making, thereby shaping their political conditions and the realm of *lokiya* in the process.

The Ethics of Subcommentary

Before ending this introduction, I must attend to my own ethical responsibilities as a scholar in the metropolitan centre using the Mil-a “as an instrument in a philosophical,” philological, and historiographical “exercise” (Ganeri 2010, 197). In a very tangible way, this dissertation is thus a subcommentary on the Mil-a, but not one that follows the text line by line or tries to preserve its overall integrity of the commentary, which Robert Gibbs claims are some of the hallmarks of premodern exegesis (Gibbs 2000, 10). Rather, I must admit that I am using this text to “assemble a system or essay in my own voice,” one hallmark of a modern commentary (Gibbs 2000, 10). Yet my own subcommentary is better understood as postmodern, in the sense that I am drawing from multiple types of sources and authors with varying degrees of distance from the Mil-a and its worldview, creating a “juxtaposition” where these different sources and authors are forced “to meet each other” in the academic arena of the blank page, which is then filled with excerpts from my primary sources, insights from other scholars, historical conjunctures, and my own interpretative prerogative (Gibbs 2000, 10). Some of these authors are writing in Burmese as stakeholders in the text and its controversy, some of these authors are from Burma writing in English in an academic register historically removed from the Mil-a but within the realms of

acceptable discourse created by the exclusive canon, and some of these authors, like me, are also writing from the metropole in a scholastic prose that claims for itself a kind of objectivity over the commentary and its author, an objectivity which, I submit, is a façade. As a result, there is a “collision and superimposition of different ontological worlds” in this work, “a major characteristic” of postmodern thought (Harvey 1990, 50). This collision on the page is thus not just between authors, but worldviews, ways of knowing and articulating sociohistorical realities, and different conceptions of history and what is possible in the religious and political realms. These worldviews might not be commensurable or reconcilable, but such incommensurability has the potential to disrupt my own way of thinking and interpreting the Mil-a, along with the axioms and metanarratives of the reader.

This work is also a postmodern *subcommentary* because I am commenting not just on the Mil-a, but on how others in Burma, Japan, North America, and Europe have commented on this text, either directly or indirectly. This attention to context and second-order discourse analyses, almost to the point of relativism, means that in a way, this dissertation is not really about the Mil-a. Indeed, there is no full translation of the text, large chapters and sections have been omitted altogether, and the commentary is made to serve my own project, which is not too dissimilar to how the Mingun Jetavana uses the Mil-a to serve his, admittedly very different, project. It might be most appropriate to say that I have set out to deconstruct the Mil-a and the Pali textual tradition of which it is a part, not as an act of iconoclasm, but in order to excavate the axioms that operate in this tradition and understand how they have responded to the changing conditions of the first half of the twentieth century, if at all. This act of deconstruction results not so much in the death of the author, but a remaking of the author as a form of text, where the intentions I impute to the Mingun Jetavana might not accurately reflect his actual intentions, but rather the

way his writing and work interacts with and reflects larger discourses that he was either responding to or which responded to him, at least in theory. In this sense, I have remade the Mingun Jetavana in a way that he may have resisted, or in a way that might not be fully recognizable to those of the communities of practice that he established. For instance, the claims made by him or at least on his behalf about his soteriological status become objects of analysis rather than objects of faith, though I have no doubt about their force and efficacy as they circulated among his monastic disciples, lay donors, meditation students, within government circles, the offices of newspaper editors, or those hearing such claims in the tea house or market. Put another way, I have invoked the fuzzy boundary between biography and historiography in Burmese literature signaled by Gustaaf Houtman (1997) to take the Mingun Jetavana as a contingency and point of climax for broader historical trends and discourses manifesting through his Mil-a, sometimes in spite of his own agency.

Such is the recursive power of commentary, manifest in my own work. If “the fundamental role of commentary” is in fact “to mediate a conversation between the past and the present” (Ganeri 2011, 6), I would argue that along with being faithful to the text one is commenting on, there is also an ethical imperative to reassemble it for new audiences, which must first involve an act of disassembling. This imperative points to the inescapable tension between the root text and its commentary, whether the latter is premodern, modern, or postmodern in its approach. Taking to heart this act of disassembling, this dissertation both complements the Mil-a, trying to justify its excesses and explain them as part of a larger vision by the Mingun Jetavana, but also competes with it. The Mil as the root text of the Mil-a and a bona fide member of the Tipiṭaka/exclusive canon, is the initial source of momentum here, exhibiting a sort of inertia that the Mingun Jetavana has tried to commandeer with his own text;

it is this same inertial force that I am trying to harness in my own work, and in trying to speak on behalf of and at times challenge the Mil-a, I too am scrambling to be a part of the intertextual history of the root text. Part of my attempted appropriation is due to the political economy of knowledge production in the modern academy, but part of this is the recursive power of commentary, transferred vicariously through the root text to its commentary, and from its commentary to a subcommentary, translation, summary, or dissertation. Whether scholars use this dissertation for their own research, write reams of criticism, take it into new directions, translate it into a new language, or take steps to lock it away in its own solitary room of neglect and decay, they too are participating in the self-generating series that the Mingun Jetavana's text does not exactly initiate, but certainly and forcefully drives forward. I have thus taken the bait, sort to speak, and if you have come this far in the introduction and decide to continue on, you too have succumbed to the recursive power of commentary.

1 *Milindapañhādi*: Negotiating the Status of the Questions of Milinda in the Burmese Councils

Introduction

With roots in Gāndhārī, traces in Sanskrit, and extant recensions in Chinese and Pali, the c. second century B.C.E.¹⁶ *Milindapañha* (*Questions of Milinda*, hereafter Mil) is an enigmatic text in the history of Buddhist literature. Featuring a debate between a brilliant but terrene Greek Bactrian monarch named Milinda and a preternaturally gifted South Asian monk named Nāgasena, the Mil purports to resolve for posterity the contradictions and inconsistencies in the

¹⁶ The dating of the Mil lends itself to several different schemes, especially given the different recensions and multiple historical layers of the text. For his part, Akira Hirakawa places the composition of the Mil in the first century C.E., after the composition of the Abhidhammapiṭaka, to which the text frequently refers (Hirakawa 1990, 130). Oskar von Hinüber divides the text as we have it in Pali into five sections, the first of which (Mil 2,^{23-89,16}) he argues “should have been composed between 100 BC and 200 AD” (von Hinüber 2000, 85). Part of the implicit reasoning for fixing this date by von Hinüber is that the *terminus post quem* of the Mil must be no earlier than the actual reign of King Menander, who is identified as King Milinda and who died c. 130. B.C.E. Bryan Levman has recently questioned this link between “Milinda” in the text and the historical person of King Menander, suggesting that “as an invented character, Milinda could simply be a name for any powerful figure who is overawed and ‘conquered’ by the truth of the *Dhamma* (as was King Asoka)” (B. G. Levman 2021b, 108). With this decoupling between Milinda and Menander, Levman claims the original composition of the Mil could hypothetically fall between “250? – ~150 BCE,” with its “rendition in Pāli and elaboration” between ~150 – 0 C.E. (B. G. Levman 2021b, 111), though he cautions that based on comparisons between the Pali and Chinese versions, there was likely never a singular ur-text, but more a loose catechism held together by similar characters, an animating logic, and the use of metaphors, which could vary widely according to their cultural setting. Eng Jin Ooi makes a similar argument, following an unpublished paper by Peter Skilling, that the dialogues of Milinda and Nāgasena were possibly “unaffiliated or independent texts (oral and written), which circulated in India and were later adopted and edited by different textual communities belonging to different schools” (Eng Jin Ooi 2022, 69). As a result of this line of thinking and the possibility that the Mil was originally not affiliated with any specific school, Eng Jin Ooi puts forth the proposal that the Pali “*Milindapañha* as we know it, may be only a fragment of what was a much wider Milinda-Nāgasena tradition” (Eng Jin Ooi 2022, 71). Aside from the “original” core of the dialogues, the later sections of the Mil, were added by the time of Buddhaghosa in the fourth and fifth centuries C.E., as the commentator quotes from the *Meṇḍakapañha*, though as Sōdo Mori points out, some of the quotations cited by Buddhaghosa do not exist in the edition of the Mil by the Pali Text Society from 1880 (Mori 1998, 301). Using the presence of the Mil in the *aṭṭhakathās*, K.R. Norman emphasizes that this text, including its later sections, “must have been composed some centuries before Buddhaghosa,” given the status and authority in which the commentator affords it (Norman [1992] 2012, 133). In terms of the Mil’s development in the second millennium, Eng Jin Ooi has shown that there are at least three recensions that circulated in Central Siam over the last five centuries, indicating the “continuous evolution of the text’s textual tradition” among various textual communities in Southeast Asia (Eng Jin Ooi 2021, 320).

Buddha’s teachings for interrogators both inside and outside Buddhism. Despite its ubiquity in Theravada Buddhism, there is a lack of consensus about the classification of the Mil vis-à-vis the Tipiṭaka,¹⁷ for although it is understood to contain *buddhavacana* (“the word[s] of the Buddha”) and was quoted in the *aṭṭhakathā* commentaries of medieval Sri Lanka, it is usually located somewhere in between the Tipiṭaka and the commentaries themselves. This lack of consensus was especially problematic during efforts in the late nineteenth and mid twentieth centuries to standardise Pali literature in Burma, when a relatively open Tipiṭaka was reconceptualised as an exclusive canon under state purview. As a result of such efforts, the Mil was included as the last text of the *Khuddakanikāya* (*Miscellaneous Collection*) of the Suttapiṭaka (i.e., the collection of discourses attributed to the Buddha or his immediate disciples), a status which it enjoys only in Burma. Yet this inclusion was not without controversy, for along with the references to the Mil in the *aṭṭhakathā* commentaries, there are also glaring omissions. In what follows I examine the process of canonisation of the Mil in Burma during the Fifth and Sixth Councils and elucidate the creative strategies deployed to negotiate its inclusion—strategies that were not universally accepted. I argue that it was in response to the standardisation process that the Mingun Jetavana composed an *aṭṭhakathā* on this text in the mid twentieth century, but crucially, that the admission of the Mil into the *Khuddakanikāya* allowed him to introduce innovative ideas of practice and reform into the supposedly sealed Pali canon itself.

¹⁷ I deliberately use the term ‘Tipiṭaka,’ which can be translated as “three baskets” and represents the collection of texts accepted as authoritative by Theravada Buddhists, instead of ‘canon,’ because, as K.R. Norman points out: “It is clear that the words *piṭaka* and *tipiṭaka* simply denote a type of text or an arrangement of texts, and do not, in themselves, imply any sort of canon, open or closed, although of course the words can be, and are, applied to a body of scriptures which is regarded as canonical” ([1992] 2012, 133). Hence while I argue later that the Tipiṭaka has many qualities of a ‘canon,’ this overlap was not always the case in different stages of its historical development, and in order to avoid invoking a transhistorical sense of these texts, I will refrain from using the term ‘Pali canon’ unless I am referring to a more exclusive set of texts, an idea I invoke below when discussing the Fifth and Sixth Councils.

To demonstrate how this process of canonisation paved the way for the Mil-a, I begin by exploring how the Mil has been classified in Pali literature by European and Asian scholars, pointing out that this text occupies a liminal space between the Tipiṭaka and *aṭṭhakathā* commentaries, an ambiguous status recognised everywhere but resolved only in Burma. For in the 1871 Fifth Council in Mandalay, the subject of the second section, the *Milindapañhā* was for the first time officially included in the Tipiṭaka, though it was the last text to receive this designation and does not appear in any of the accounts of the editing process carried out by King Mindon, the second last monarch of the Konbaung Dynasty (1752-1885). The standardised, exclusive Pali canon partially produced in the Fifth Council was further cemented by the Sixth Council in the middle of the twentieth century (1954-1956), the subject of the third section in this chapter. Yet unlike in the Fifth Council, which was a wholly domestic affair, the *Milindapañhā*'s place in the proceedings was not without controversy, as the Sri Lankan and Thai delegations protested its inclusion, a sentiment also shared by some important Burmese monks. The protest further demonstrated the ambiguous status this text had—existing on the edge of what was and what was not allowed in the exclusive canon then emerging. I end this chapter by arguing that precisely because the *Milindapañhā* was incorporated into the Pali canon, the Mingun Jetavana was afforded an opportunity to write his commentary in the authoritative *aṭṭhakathā* form. By invoking both the authority of the canonised *Milindapañhā* and the *aṭṭhakathā* type of commentary for his monastic reforms and meditational practice, the Mingun Jetavana attempted to insert himself into the Pali canon and Theravada orthodoxy, thereby pronouncing the importance of his text and fueling the backlash that ensued.

1.1 Classifying the *Milindapañha*

The discussion begins with the categorisation of the Mil and its relation to the Tipiṭaka in the history of Pali literature. It has been argued “that the Pāli canon [...] was not fixed until the time of Buddhaghosa who, by listing the texts which he regarded as forming the various constituent parts of the *tipiṭaka*, in effect defined and limited the scope of the *tipiṭaka*” (Norman 1983, 138).¹⁸ However, the position of the Mil is not clearly stipulated in the *aṭṭhakathās* ascribed to Buddhaghosa and others, which contain contradictory statements made about this text’s status. K.R. Norman signals this fact by writing that the Mil is both “highly regarded by the commentators, but [is] not given canonical status” (Norman [1992] 2012, 139). As Sodo Mori points out, it is so highly regarded that in the *Manorathapūraṇī*, the *aṭṭhakathā* on the *Aṅguttaranikāya* (*Numerical Discourses*), a quote from the Mil (Mil 133,²³⁻²⁷) is qualified as “thus they have quoted the *sutta*” (*ti suttaṃ āharimṣu*) (Mp I 93,⁴⁻⁷), meaning that the author of the *Manorathapūraṇī* considered the Mil equal in status to a *sutta* (Mori 1998, 300). While the *Manorathapūraṇī* is a relatively early commentary attributed to Buddhaghosa, references to the Mil as *sutta* are also found in the works of “later Pāli commentators, such as Upasena” (Mori 1998, 298), who wrote the *Sadhammapajjotikā*, the *aṭṭhakathā* on the *Mahāniddeśa*, written in either “AD 877 or 817” (von Hinüber 2000, 141). Coming from an earlier period than the *Sadhammapajjotikā*, Mori explains that from the “name of the Chinese version of [the Mil], the *Na-sen-bi-ku-kyo*, of which ‘*kyo*’ means ‘scripture’, it would be possible to consider that the original text for the above translation had already affixed the word, ‘*sutta*’ or ‘*sutra*’ (scripture)”

¹⁸ Norman goes on to qualify this point when he adds that “[t]here are, on the other hand, others who believe that the writing down of the canon in the first century B.C.E. had effectively done that already” (Norman 1983, 138).

to its title (1998, 298). Hence in both the Pali commentaries and in whatever form the Mil travelled to what we know call China, it appears that it was already associated with the Tipiṭaka, possibly as a *sutta* itself.

Yet the Mil is not listed as belonging to any accepted *sutta* collection in the *aṭṭhakathā* literature mentioned by Norman above. For instance, as Toshiichi Endo (2013, 233) makes clear, the enumeration of the texts belonging to the *Khuddakanikāya* found in the *Samantapāsādikā* (Sp I 18,¹²⁻¹⁶), the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* (Sv I 17,¹⁰⁻¹⁴), the *Paramatthajotikā* I (Pj I 12,⁷⁻¹¹), and the *Atthasālinī* (As 18,²⁸⁻³²) provide the following list, from which the Mil is noticeably absent: *khuddakapāṭha-dhammapada-udāna-itivuttaka-suttanipāta-vimānavatthu-petavatthu-thera-therāgāthā-jātaka-niddesa-pāṭisambhidā-apadāna-buddhavaṃsa-cariyāpiṭakavasena paññarasabhedo khuddanikāyo ti idaṃ suttantapiṭakaṃ nāma*.¹⁹ If the *Sadhammapajjotikā* and the *Manorathapūraṇī* refer to the Mil as a *sutta*, then how to explain its absence from the above list of texts from the *Khuddakanikāya*?

Part of the reason for its exclusion, I suggest, has to do with the bifurcated nature of the dialogues between Nāgasena and Milinda. For in the *Samantapāsādikā*, the *aṭṭhakathā* on the Vinayapiṭaka, von Hinüber points to a passage that appears to split the Mil into canonical and non-canonical elements (von Hinüber 2000, 86). The passage in question is part of an explanation of the fourth *pācittiya* rule in the *Parivāra* section of the Vinayapiṭaka, where it decrees that a monk commits an offence requiring expiation (P. *pācittiya*) “for making one who is not ordained [as a monk] speak Dhamma line by line” (*anupasampannaṃ padaso dhammaṃ*

¹⁹ It is not clear whether this list belongs to the *Dīghabhāṇakās*, the *Majjhimbhāṇakās*, the relatively later *Khuddakabhāṇakas*, or was the creation of another party, such as the compilers of these commentaries themselves. For further discussion on the various lists of texts belonging to the *Khuddakanikāya*, see Endo (2013, 232–34, 239), and for a discussion of the *Khuddakanikāya* in the broader South Asian context, see Norihisa Baba (2022b).

vāceyya) (Vin IV 14,²⁹⁻³⁰) (Vin trans. Horner 1966, VI:23).²⁰ The *Samantapāsādikā* commentary on this rule proceeds by offering various examples of what counts as *dhamma*. At the end of this discussion, the *Meṇḍaka* division of the Mil is listed as one of the teachings “not included in the three councils” (*tisso saṅgītiyo anārūlḥe*) (Sp IV 742,²⁴).²¹ According to the *Samantapāsādikā*, “it is not an offence” (P. *anāpatti*) to cause a lay person to recite “the Elder [Nāgasena]’s own ideas in the *Milindapañha*” (*milindapañhesu therassa sakapaṭibhāṇe*) (Sp IV 742,²⁷⁻²⁸), but it is an offence (P. *āpatti*) to cause a lay person to recite “that which has been produced for the sake of convincing the king” (*yaṃ rañño saññāpanatthaṃ āharitvā*) (Sp IV 742,²⁸). Though the difference between Nāgasena’s “own ideas” and “that which he produces to convince the king” is not defined in this passage, the former likely refers to the similes and folk examples Nāgasena uses to explain his answers, while the latter likely refers to those instances when Nāgasena supplies excerpts from the Tipiṭaka itself, some of which are still untraced to any extant literature.²² In this sense, the Mil is split between those sections that are *sutta* proper and the opinions or personal ideas of Nāgasena. Thus, when the Mil is referred to as *sutta* in the *aṭṭhakathās*, it is possible that the reference is not to the text taken in its entirety, but to those

²⁰ I would like to thank Bryan Levman for pointing out the nature of this comment in the root text and for assisting me in unravelling the importance of this reference to the Mil in Sp IV 742.

²¹ The other texts included here are the *Kulumbasutta*, the *Rājavādasutta*, the *Tikkhindriya*, the *Catuparivaṭṭam*, the *Nandopananda*, and the *Apalāladamana* (Sp IV 742,²⁴⁻²⁶).

²² For example, building on the work of Wilhelm Trenckner and Thomas William Rhys Davids, I.B. Horner laments the fact that there are “approximately sixty references still untraced” in the Mil (Horner 1963, xii). Though it is possible these references are merely paraphrases, misquotes, or from missing sections of the Pali Tipiṭaka, their sheer number suggests that some of them come from the non-extant Sarvāstivādin Tipiṭaka (Horner 1963, xv), or some other school without a complete surviving literature, like the Pudgalavādins or Mahāsāṃghikas. It might not be possible to ascertain the source of these quotations without an archaeological discovery of manuscripts, but such untraced citations suggest “that the compiler [or compilers] felt himself [or herself] to be under no obligation or compulsion to draw from the teachings of one ‘school’ only” (Horner 1963, xlv). To this end, Eng Jin Ooi argues that it is perhaps best to see the Mil as originally being non-sectarian, as drawing from several canons circulating at the time of its composition, then edited to reflect the school affiliations into which it was adopted, such as the Mahāvihāra of what is now Sri Lanka (Eng Jin Ooi 2022, 70).

canonical passages produced by Nāgasena to convince the king. A systematic study of the content of the references to the Mil in the commentaries should yield insight into the problem, but it seems that it was precisely this kind of material referenced by Nāgasena “that Buddhaghosa had in mind when he referred to some of the Buddha’s utterances being *pāli-muttaka* ‘not included in the [scriptural] texts’” (Norman [1992] 2012, 139).

From the standpoint of Nāgasena’s own opinions, however, the Mil is usually considered an *aṭṭhakathā* itself. For instance, Mori (1998, 297) discusses a passage in the *Saddhammapajjotikā*, the commentary on the *Mahāniddeśa*, that compares a quote from the *Atthasālinī*, the commentary on the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, introduced by the phrase “indeed, this has been spoken in the *aṭṭhakathā*” (*vuttañ h’etaṃ aṭṭhakathāyaṃ*) (Nidd-a I 165,²⁹), with a quote from the Mil (60,¹²⁻²³), introduced by the phrase “and having said this, this *sutta* has been handed down” (*idañ ca vatvā idaṃ suttaṃ ābhaṭaṃ*) (Nidd-a I 166,¹). Even though the word *sutta* for the Mil was shown above to be ambiguous, Mori argues that “it is clear that the quotation from [the Mil] was treated as equal as that from a source named ‘*aṭṭhakathā*’” (Mori 1998, 297), namely, the *Atthasālinī*. Indeed, the Mil appears in certain instances to function like an *aṭṭhakathā* commentary. For example, at the start of the text after its chapters are enumerated (Mil 2,¹⁶⁻²²), the chapter known as *Pubbayoga* (*Previous Connections*) is initiated by its own explanation: “‘*pubbayogo*’ means their previous karma” (*pubbayogo ti tesam pubbakammaṃ*) (Mil 2,²³). In the same manner, von Hinüber notes that the commentary on the *Mahāniddeśa* (*Saddhammapajjotikā*) “proper begins with a definition of *niddeśa*” (Nidd-a I 2,¹⁷⁻¹⁸) (von Hinüber 2000, 143), while the *Saddhammapakāsinī* (*Illuminator of the True Dhamma*), the *aṭṭhakathā* on the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (*Path of Analytical Insight*), “begins by defining *paṭisambhidā*” (Paṭis-a I 2,²¹⁻²³) (von Hinüber 2000, 144). Though this is but one example in the

Mil, it is a crucial juncture, coming at the beginning of the text just before the dialogue between Nāgasena and Milinda. Skilling suggests that “much of the narrative material” in this chapter, known as the *bāhirakathā* in Rhys David’s divisions, “was composed in Ceylon” (Skilling 1998, 93) after the so-called original was translated into Pali. If true, the explanation of the title of the first chapter, which may have been a separately circulating text in its own right, might indicate that those who were amending what they had before them saw the Mil as a sort of commentary itself, thereby adding commentary-like sections such as the explanation of the word *pubbayoga*.

1.2 *Milindapañha* in Burma

As far as the Mingun Jetavana is concerned, he takes the Mil as a *sutta* worthy of its own *aṭṭhakathā*, but he also implies that Buddhaghosa, the paradigmatic commentator working sometime between “AD 370 to 450” (von Hinüber 2000, 103),²³ had some part in its composition. For in the *Nidānakathā* (*Introductory Discourse*) of the Mil-a, it is written that

this very *Milindapañha* composition has been made effective throughout by Bhadanta Buddhaghosa, the disciple of the Buddha, the teacher, who has the status of a composer of the commentaries on the [*dhamma*] collections, and [the Mil] is equally brought to a state of esteem because of the readings collected [therein] and is also respected and honoured right up to today in regard to the lineages of the teachings.²⁴

²³ Cousins surmises that the dates of Buddhaghosa’s commentaries are “posterior to the *Dīpavaṃsa*, a chronicle written after the reign of Mahāsenā who died around 331 CE (± 30 years) and they are prior to the translation of a version of the *Vinaya Commentary* into Chinese in 489 CE.” (2013, 390), a text which mentions the name of Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* (von Hinüber 2000, 103). While this commentary on the Vinayapiṭaka (the *Samantapāsādikā*) is traditionally ascribed to Buddhaghosa, this ascription is unlikely, as the “style and structure of the *Samantapāsādikā* are so different that it is hardly conceivable that the same author was at work here as in the *nikāya* commentaries, even if the topic, Buddhist law, *vinaya*, is taken into consideration, which is quite different from the Buddhist *dhamma* discussed in the *nikāyas*” (von Hinüber 2013, 363).

²⁴ *tayidaṃ milindapañhāpakaraṇaṃ saṅghaṭṭhakathānaṃ kattubhūtena bhadantaanubuddhabuddhaghosācariyena tahiṃ tahiṃ sādhaṃ katvā samupanītapāṭhasena sambhāvitattamupanītaṃ samānaṃ sāsanīyaparamparāsu yāvajjatanā pi garukataṃ hoti mānitaṃ ca* (Mil-a 1, ¹⁷⁻²⁰). Unless stated otherwise, all the translations from the Mil-a

The first point to note in this passage is that when the Mingun Jetavana claims the Mil is esteemed “because of the readings collected” therein (*samupanītapāṭhavasena*), he seems to be reinforcing the observations above, namely, that the importance of the root text lies not so much in Nāgasena’s own ideas, but in the *sutta* passages scattered throughout, which the Mingun Jetavana must also have recognised are in some instances untraced to extant versions of the Tipiṭaka. But critically for the discussion here, the Mingun Jetavana states that the Mil “has been made effective throughout” (P. *tahiṃ tahiṃ sādhaḥkaṃ katvā*) by Buddhaghosa. What he means by “made effective throughout” is not exactly clear, but he stops short of saying that the Mil was composed by Buddhaghosa; rather, the Mingun Jetavana appears to claim that this text was edited, compiled, or redacted by Buddhaghosa in some manner. Such a notion is not altogether unprecedented, because P.S. Jaini, who edited the *Milinda-ṭīkā* discussed in the next chapter, notes that while “[c]ommenting on the first five introductory verses (Milindo nāma so rājā, etc.),” the author of this *ṭīkā* “observes that these gāthās as well as several other sentences consisting of prologue and epilogue were made (kata) by Bhadanta Buddhaghosa” (Jaini [1961a] 1986, xii).²⁵ Jaini goes on to add that “[u]sually in the Pali commentaries one finds passages attributed to Porāṇas, or Saṅgītikāras. So this specific reference to Buddhaghosa is significant. It shows the existence of a tradition which believed that he was actively responsible in revising or even recasting the [Mil]” (Jaini [1961a] 1986, xii). Picking up on these comments by Jaini, Norman surmises that this notion of Buddhaghosa “revising or even recasting” the Mil “may account for some of the interpolations” found in this text (Norman 1983, 150), which include

are my own, but I must thank Christoph Emmrich and Bryan Levman for help in revising my translation and suggesting alternative readings in many cases.

²⁵ The passages in question are found at Mil-ṭ 3,¹⁶⁻¹⁷ and Mil-ṭ 8,³¹⁻³².

purported excerpts from the Mil quoted by Buddhaghosa that cannot be found in extant versions. Hence while the Mingun Jetavana is not asserting that the Mil is itself a commentary, he is recognising its close affinity with *aṭṭhakathās* and suggesting that it was edited in some way by Buddhaghosa himself.

Like the Pali commentators, scholars in Asia and Europe have tended to categorize the Mil somewhere in-between the Tipiṭaka and the *aṭṭhakathās*. Akira Hirakawa, for example, places the Mil in the “transitional period between works included in the *Abhidharma-piṭaka* and full commentaries” (Hirakawa 1990, 130). Mori agrees, stating that the Mil is “now usually placed between the Tipiṭaka and the *Aṭṭhakathā*” (Mori 1991, 129), not quite elevated to the status of a *sutta* but not quite relegated to the status of a commentary. This liminal status is captured by the terms ‘semi-canonical’ or ‘post-canonical,’ terms which have been applied to the Mil for more than a century. In his “List of Pāli MSS. in the Bibliothèque at Paris” from 1882, M. Léon Feer classifies the Mil under the heading of ‘paracanonical texts’ (Feer 1882, 35). This classification is probably largely based on the emic categorisation of the Mil in Sri Lanka, where Orientalist scholars had the earliest and most sustained engagement with Pali texts coterminous with long-term colonial occupation. As a result of this early engagement, “what is commonly understood by ‘Pali Literature’ today is essentially the ‘Pali Literature of Ceylon,’ in the sense of having been transmitted by the Mahāvihāra tradition of the island” (Skilling 2014, 347). This Sri Lankan-centric view of the Mil has become entrenched, even when it is qualified with evidence from other Theravada communities. As Peter Jackson (2006, 61) and Norman ([1992] 2012, 141) have discussed, Charles Duroiselle, reviewing Mabel Haynes Bode’s statement that the “Burmese tradition adds to the fifteen ancient texts of the Khuddakanikāya four other works—

the Milindapaṇha [sic], the Suttasaṅgaha, the Peṭakopadesa, and the Netti or Nettipakaraṇa”

(Bode 1909, 4–5), responds that Bode:

has not understood her text, or, rather, she is not yet familiar enough with the Burmese tradition. No educated Burman, lay or monk, ever included these four works among the Piṭaka books of the Khuddakanikāya: they were placed after the books of the Khuddaka because only of their intrinsic value [...] as a help to the study of the Scriptures; and in the Piṭakattha-main itself (p. 17) the mention of these four works is separated from that of the books of the Khuddaka by a Pāli stanza and its translation, in which it is said that the Khuddaka has only 15 books. (Duroiselle 1911, 120–21)

Since both Bode and Duroiselle were writing more than a century ago, it is difficult to say who was correct in their assessment of the place of the Mil in Burma at that time, especially as the exact distinction Duroiselle is trying to make is not altogether clear.

What can be said is that since at least the middle of the last century, the Mil is officially considered part of the Tipiṭaka in Burma, where it is the last text in the *Khuddakanikāya*, the final collection in the Suttantapiṭaka. This collection contains a mélange of early and later texts that include some specifically ascribed to the Buddha, but many that are not, such as the *Theragāthā* (*Verses of the Male Elders*) and *Therīgāthā* (*Verses of the Female Elders*), verses of the Buddha’s top female and male disciples respectively. Unlike the other collections in the Suttantapiṭaka, the *Khuddakanikāya* “always remained open for additions” (von Hinüber 2000, 76), meaning it became a repository for texts that do not neatly fit anywhere else because of their length, pedigree, later period, or thematic content, such as the *Dhammapāda* and *Jātaka* collections. Given its miscellaneous nature, the presence of narrative material like the *Jātakas*, and a preponderance of material ascribed to figures other than the Buddha, the *Khuddakanikāya* is the most natural fit for the Mil. What’s more, the “Khuddakanikāya always remained open for additions” (von Hinüber 2000, 76), which partly explains its protracted historical development and extrapolated commentarial timeline, since the last *aṭṭhakathā* commentaries were composed

on the texts of this collection. Yet one could argue that the Abhidhammapiṭaka would also be suitable, given the heavy *abhidhamma* content of many of Nāgasena’s answers, which sometimes simply refer the reader to the Abhidhammapiṭaka for further explanation. The Mil also shares an affinity with the fifth book of the Abhidhammapiṭaka, the *Kathāvatthu* (*Subjects of Discourse*), another text of questions and answers, though more polemical and rhetorical in nature. Like the Mil, the *Kathāvatthu* is self-consciously set well after the time of the Buddha in quasi-historical circumstances, in this instance, during the reign of King Asoka (r. 268-232 B.C.E). Indeed, the Mil directly references its affinity with the *Kathāvatthu* in a prophecy that opens its pages, claiming that the “Gotama Buddha uttered these words of prophesy firmly predicting their destinies [i.e. Milinda and Nāgasena] just as he did in the case of the venerable Moggaliputta Tissa Thera” (Mil trans. Pu [1983] 2006, 6), who is the protagonist of the *Kathāvatthu* just as Nāgasena is in the Mil. It is possible that the prophecy in the Mil was in fact modelled after that found in the *nidāna* supplied by the *Kathāvatthu-aṭṭhakathā* (Kv-a 1,¹⁷⁻²⁰-2,¹⁻⁹), especially since it is explained in the *Atthasālinī* (As 4,³¹⁻³⁵) “that the *Kathāvatthu* is authoritative because the Buddha knew the contents of the work in advance” (Bond 1982, 31).²⁶ This prescience is critical for granting legitimacy to texts like the Mil and the *Kathāvatthu*, for as George Bond explains, “the Theravadins came to distinguish,” in both the *Atthasālinī* and the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, “between ‘the word of the Buddha’ that Gotama ‘spoke’ only with his mind or his wisdom and that which he actually uttered” (Bond 1982, 31).

²⁶ Skilling and Kōgen Mizuno point out that in certain Thai versions of the text, this prophecy is said to have been delivered by the Buddha on his deathbed (Skilling 2010, 12; Mizuno 2000, 7).

It is not exactly clear when the Mil was added to the Suttantapiṭaka in Burma, either officially or as suggested by Duroiselle, as a pedagogical supplement, but according to the Mingun Jetavana, this text was sanctioned as part of the “triple basket of the words of the Buddha” (*tepiṭakaṃ buddhavacanam*) in Sri Lanka during the Fourth Council.²⁷ In his *Ganthārambakathā* (*Discourse on the Undertaking of the Text*), the second introductory section to the Mil-a, the Mingun Jetavana writes that

here what has been called the *Milindapañham* has been handed down in the lineage of King Milinda by 500 great Elders, arahants who chanted the three-basket *buddhavacana*, under whose authority it was made into a book—the *buddhavacana* that was preserved only orally and learned by heart orally in the Āloka cave at the time of King Vaṭṭagāmaṇi in the island of Sīhaḷa by the leading group of monks living in the Abhayagiri monastery, reciting it [along with] what is called the *nidānakathā* [introductory discourse] of this *Milindapañha*, a framing story (*bāhirakathaṃ*) two-fold because of its indication in brief (*uddesa*) and its exegetical exposition (*niddesa*).²⁸

The first notable feature this passage is the fact that the Mingun Jetavana not only connects the Mil with the Fourth Council, but with the “Abhayagiri monastery.”²⁹ The reason for the Mingun Jetavana’s ascription is not explained further, but it is likely due to the subcontinental South Asian origins of the text, its many non-Theravāda elements,³⁰ and the fact that the less-

²⁷ In using the Pali term *tepiṭaka* here instead of the more usual *tipiṭaka*, the Mingun Jetavana is in fact following the Mil (18,¹⁵). This reference in the root text is probably one of the earliest occurrences to the “three baskets” in extant Pali literature, and as Norman explains further, the “word *tipetakin* ‘having three *piṭakas*’ occurs in the canon in the Parivāra to the Vinaya, and *tepiṭaka* and *tipetaka* occur in the Mil. The Vinaya reference occurs in the list of theras prefixed to the Parivāra, which is probably an addition made in Ceylon as late as the 1st century C.E.” (Norman [1992] 2012, 133).

²⁸ *tattha yaṃ pana vuttam milindapañham/ tassa milindapañhassa nidānakathāsāṅkhātāṃ uddesaniddesavasena duvidham bāhirakathaṃ kathentehi abhayagirivāsigaṇapāṃmokkhehi sīhaḷadīpe vaṭṭagāmaṇirājakāle ālokaguhāyaṃ mukhena vācugataṃ mukheneva dhāritaṃ tepiṭakaṃ buddhavacanam pothakārūḷhavasena saṅgāyantehi mahātherehi pañcāsatēhi arahantehi milindarājavamse āgataṃ* (Mil-a 4,¹⁻⁶).

²⁹ Kōgen Mizuno argues the same, writing that “[i]n terms of the Pali recension, the ‘*Milindapañha*’ is said to be introduced to Sri Lanka through the heterodox Abhayagiri temple, which had many Indian bhikkhus. The time of introduction was soon after the founding of the Abhayagiri temple in 86 BC” (Mizuno 2000, 4).

³⁰ Levman, for instance, writes that the “Indic *Milindapañha* contains dozens, perhaps hundreds of words which are unique to Mil; that is, they do not appear in the canon and seem to have been used specifically to express and elaborate on some of the doctrinal concepts which appear in Mil” (Levman 2021b, 126). The fact that these words

conservative Abhayagiri was more receptive to monks and ideas from the subcontinent. Another possible reason the Mingun Jetavana makes this ascription is due to his linking of the Mil with the Fourth Council, and the connection between the Fourth Council and the Abhayagiri. Heinz Bechert remarks that the “available source-material does not allow us to decide [...] whether it was a meeting supported by all Ceylonese monks or by the Mahāvihāra faction only” (1992, 50–51), but the Mingun Jetavana is likely following the account of the Fourth Council first found in the *Dīpavaṃsa* (*Chronicles of the Island*) (Dīp 103,¹¹⁻¹⁴), where the proceedings were said to be held under the auspices of King Vaṭṭagāmaṇi, who also founded the Abhayagiri monastery (Dīp 101,⁷⁻⁸).³¹ In contrast, Norman argues that the reason the Fourth Council was held “is because of the threat posed by famine, war, and the growing power of the newly established Abhayagiri” (1983, 10), which would imply that the events were convened by the Mahāvihāra only. Yet Norman’s contention is not supported by the *Dīpavaṃsa* itself, which merely states that “at this time, the Bhikkhus who perceived the decay of created beings, assembled and in order that the Religion might endure for a long time, they recorded (the above-mentioned texts) in written books” (Dīp trans. Oldenberg 1879, 211).³² In terms of the numbers of participants and location cited by the Mingun Jetavana above, these details are not mentioned in the *Dīpavaṃsa*. Norman

are unique to the *Milindapañha* suggest that in some cases, they refer to concepts that come from another Buddhist school, as the text itself is seen as originating outside of the Theravada tradition (von Hinüber 2000, 81).

³¹ The events mentioned in the *Dīpavaṃsa* are not actually called the ‘Fourth Council,’ but the title is used in the *Sāsanavaṃsa* when it is said that *vuttaṃ c’etaṃ sārattadīpaniyaṃ nāma vinayaṭikāyaṃ: catutthasaṃgītisadisā hi potthakārohasaṃgītī ti* (Sās 23²⁸⁻¹⁹). The Mingun Jetavana is very likely following the *Sāsanavaṃsa* in his terminology of the different councils, since it was composed just over 75 years before he started the Mil-a.

³² In following the *Dīpavaṃsa* and linking the Fourth Council to the Abhayagiri, the Mingun Jetavana was either ignoring or unaware of the account found in the 14th or 15th century *Saddhamasaṅgaha*, where “it is said that the meeting was sponsored by the king and held in the Mahāvihāra” but Bechert clarifies that “this relation is evidently a rather late construction” (Bechert 1992, 51). According to Bhikkhu Ñāṇatusita, the *Saddhamasaṅgaha* is of Thai origin, authored by Dhammakitti Mahāsāmi, and datable to either the 14th or 15th century (Ñāṇatusita, 2008, 39). Giving its relative lateness, it is quite possible that the Mingun Jetavana was not aware of this text or did not consider it valid.

points out that “the Pūjāvaliya and Nikāyasaṅgraha, however, written in Ceylon in the 13th and 14th centuries respectively, state that the writing down was a result of the holding of a council of 500 *bhikkhus* at the Aluvihāra (Āloka-vihāra)” (1983, 11), details which the Mingun Jetavana probably took from the 1861 *Sāsanavaṃsa* by Burmese monk Paññasāmi (Sās 23,²³⁻²⁵). Like the *Dīpavaṃsa*, however, the *Sāsanavaṃsa* does not link this council with the Abhayagiri directly, hence it seems as though the Mingun Jetavana is relying on his own judgements here or alternately, referencing another account of the Fourth Council.³³

The second important detail in the above-mentioned passage from the Mil-a is the suggested timeline of the root text. While it is not explained here or elsewhere why the Mingun Jetavana associates the Mil with the Fourth Council, perhaps he is taking a quasi-text-historical approach by connecting Milinda with the historical personage of Menander, a Greek Bactrian in the line of Alexander the Great who was born near modern day Kabul in Afghanistan around 180 B.C.E, dying 50 years later circa 130 B.C.E (Aston 2004, 98). In this, he might be influenced by scholarship from outside Burma, for the Mingun Jetavana seems to be providing a date for the Mil that does not exactly align with the 500-year prophecy mentioned in the text and followed by the *Sāsanavaṃsa* (Sās 50,³⁻⁵). Given that Burma celebrated the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha’s enlightenment in 1956, the Mingun Jetavana is likely taking the corrected long chronology of the Buddha’s life recounted in the *Dīpavaṃsa* (Dīp 41,²²⁻²³), *Mahāvaṃsa* (Mhv 5,²¹), and the *Samantapāsādikā* (Sp 41,²⁵⁻²⁶) when corrected against the dating of the Asokan

³³ Despite the claim made by the Mingun Jetavana, the Mil is not considered as part of the *Khuddakanikāya* in the *Saddhammasaṅgaha*, “the oldest known Pāli bibliographical reference work, [which] was compiled in the 14th century by Dhammakitti Mahāsāmi, [a Thai monk] who visited Ceylon and was a pupil of Dhammakitti” (Pecenko 2002, 63). In both lists of the *Khuddakanikāya* given in the *Saddhammasaṅgaha* (Saddhamma-s 27²⁵⁻³⁰ and 29²⁴⁻²⁶, in the JPS 1890 edition), the entry ends with the *Cariyāpiṭaka*. I am not aware of how widespread knowledge of the *Saddhammasaṅgaha* is in Burma, or whether the Mingun Jetavana was cognizant of this omission.

inscriptions. If so, then the Fourth Council occurred less than 500 years after the Buddha's *parinibbāna* in 483 B.C.E., during the reign of King Vaṭṭagāmaṇi. But it is not clear on which date for the Fourth Council the Mingun Jetavana is relying. Bechert dates the reign of Vaṭṭagāmaṇi to 89-77 B.C.E (Bechert 1992, 46), while Norman offers a date of 29-17 B.C.E. (1983, 10). However, even if one takes the earlier date offered by Bechert, the Fourth Council comes only around 400 years after the *parinibbāna*. As he states that the Mil was “handed down in the lineage of King Milinda,” the Mingun Jetavana seems to allow for the fact that the events recorded in the text took place even prior to the time of King Vaṭṭagāmaṇi, meaning that Nāgasena and Milinda must have lived well before the 500-year marker after the Buddha's *parinibbāna* stipulated in the text itself. In other words, the Mingun Jetavana does not take the 500-year date supplied by the text literally, seeming to rely on other external histories or possibly foreign scholarship.

Crucially, the Mingun Jetavana's timeline is at odds with what is found in the introduction (P. *nidāna*) of the first volume of the *Tipiṭaka pāli-mran mā abhidhān* (တိပိဋက ပါဠိ-မြန်မာအဘိဓာန် *The Tipiṭaka Pali-Burmese Dictionary*; hereafter, the *Tipiṭaka abhidhān*), which reflects the official account on this matter in Burma and was published in 1964. In this *nidāna* it is explained, after citing the same 500-prophecy by the Buddha in the Mil offered above, that

Ashin Nāgasena and King Milinda are extraordinary people [who] appeared more than 500 years after the exalted Buddha completed [his] *parinibbāna*. If the events of both [those people occurred] over 500 years [from the time of the Buddha's *parinibbāna*], then the *Milindapañha* emerged at an even later date. As such, it should certainly be noted that

the *Milindapañha* appeared as a text after the *piṭaka* was inscribed on palm-leaves during the [Fourth Council] at the time of King Vaṭugāmaṇi.³⁴ (Ñānuttara 1964, 26–27)

Hence while the author of the *nidānas* to the *Tipiṭaka abhidhān* explicitly places the emergence of the Mil sometime after the Fourth Council, following the dates given in the text itself, the Mingun Jetavana specifies this council as the very moment the text was added to the Tipiṭaka, but only after it had been passed down in the lineage of King Milinda. In this sense, the Mingun Jetavana is not basing his timeline on what the text says about itself but is bringing a more critical approach to bear. Perhaps the author of the *nidāna* was directly reacting to the timeline offered by the Mingun Jetavana himself, since the Mil-a was controversial and surely known to the authors of the *Tipiṭaka abhidhān*. Yet regardless of whether the author of the *nidāna* was implicitly rejecting the Mingun Jetavana’s view, he was certainly rejecting the Mingun Jetavana’s more textual-critical approach, which did not take the Mil’s paratextual self-pronouncements literally.

For his own part, I believe one reason for the Mingun Jetavana’s more critical approach is the need to sanction the Mil as belonging to the Tipiṭaka from an early age, thereby justifying and elevating his own commentary. In the above statement, the Mingun Jetavana invokes the “500 Great Elders” who were “*arahants*,” or enlightened beings, under whose authority the Mil was included in the Tipiṭaka, even though the Buddha does not make a direct appearance in the text aside from the prophecy mentioned above. This invocation of enlightened authority is important since the status of the text is sometimes ambiguous in both the *aṭṭhakathā* literature

³⁴ အရှင်နာဂသိန်နှင့် မိလိန္ဒဘုရင်တို့သည် မြတ်စွာဘုရားပရိနိဗ္ဗာန်ပြုပြီးနောက် အနှစ် ၅၀၀-ကျော်မှ ပေါ်ခဲ့ကြသော ပုဂ္ဂိုလ်ထူးဖြစ်ကြ၏။ ၎င်းတို့၏ အဖြစ်အပျက်ပင် အနှစ်-၅၀၀ ကျော်လျှင် မိလိန္ဒပညာကျမ်းပေါ်ပေါက်ရာခေတ်မှာ ထို့ထက်ပင် နောက်ကျပေဦးမည်။ သို့ဖြစ်၍ မိလိန္ဒပညာကျမ်းသည် ဝဠုဂါမဏိမင်းလက်ထက် ပိဋကတော်တို့ကို ပေထက်အက္ခရာ တင်ပြီးသည့်နောက်မှ ပေါ်လာသောကျမ်း ဖြစ်သည် ဟု ကော်နိမှတ်သင့်ပေသည် (Ñānuttara 1964, 27)

and subsequent Theravada histories inside and outside of Burma. The stress that the Mingun Jetavana places on the scriptural status of the Mil is seen in the analysis he carries out in his commentary, which relies on the integrity of each letter. Indeed, the Mingun Jetavana invokes this authority later in the Mil-a, when he warns the reader that since a word or passage “agrees with the word[s] that have come down in th[is] *sutta*, you all should certainly not second guess: ‘is this one [letter or word] proper, is this one not proper?’ It should be taken just as it has been received.”³⁵ For to reject the validity of the Mil or individual words therein is tantamount to rejecting the authority of the 500 *arahants* of the Fourth Council. Thus, it is essential for the Mingun Jetavana to establish the scriptural pedigree of the Mil in the reader’s mind as early and firmly as possible, since he proclaims that “we will explain the analysis of [each and every] word” (*padaviggahaṃ vaṇṇayissāma*).³⁶

1.3 Fifth Council and the Creation of the Exclusive Canon

Despite the uncertain historical grounds for the Mingun Jetavana’s connection of the Mil with the Fourth Council, this text was either included in or amended to the Suttantapiṭaka during the so-called Fifth Council,³⁷ which took place in Burma in the nineteenth century under then King Mindon, the penultimate monarch of Burma in the Konbaung Dynasty (1752-1885). The Fifth

³⁵ *sutte āgatapadena saṃsanditvā ekaccaṃ yuttaṃ ekaccaṃ na yuttaṃ ti ekamsato no vicāretha yathālābho gahetabbo* (Mil-a 12¹¹⁻¹³)

³⁶ (Mil-a 12¹⁰⁻¹¹)

³⁷ I reference the Fifth Council as ‘so-called’ because it was not recognised outside of Burma, having a relatively parochial scope. Indeed, two councils took place before it in Thailand. According to the 1789 *Saṅgītivamsa* (*Chronicle of the Councils*) composed in Thailand, what is called an ‘Eighth Council’ took place in Chiang Mai in 1476, while what is called a ‘Ninth Council’ took place in 1788-1789 in Bangkok (Kumar and Kumar 2021, xxxiv). Hence the Fifth Council is only ‘fifth’ if one does not count these two previous events, along with various other quasi-councils which are included in the *Saṅgītivamsa* to reach the numbers of eight and nine above.

Council began on April 15th, 1871, reaching “its successful conclusion on 12th November 1871. It took five months and three days to complete” (Myint Myint Oo 2011a, 112). The council, which consisted of 2,400 monks, was “led by Venerable Jāgara” (Myint Myint Oo 2011a, 113), the convenor who was then known as the Meiktila Sayadaw (မိတ္ထီလာဆရာတော် Mitthīlā Cha rā tau, a.k.a. ဦးဇာဂရ Ṫh Jāgara, 1822-1894), but who would later become the first Shwegyin Sayadaw (ရွှေကျင်ဆရာတော် Rhve kyañ Cha rā tau). The ultimate goal of the council was to edit and produce a complete set of the Tipiṭaka, that is, to ascertain whether any texts had been corrupted or lost, and to sanction an official set for use in the kingdom. The complete Tipiṭaka was then to be inscribed on 729 marble slabs and installed at the *Ku tuil tau bhu rāḥ* (ကုသိုလ်တော်ဘုရား, hereafter the Kuthodaw Pagoda) in the royal capital of Mandalay, where the slabs still stand today.³⁸ In preparation for the inscription process, Myint Myint Oo emphasises that King Mindon was constantly engaged in editing and re-editing the MSS at his disposal, and all together, he “had [the] *piṭaka* inscribed on palm-leaves four times during [the] twenty-five years of his reign” (Myint Myint Oo 2011a, 84). As the work of preparing the texts for inscription on October 14th, 1860, it can be said that the editing process for the Fifth Council commenced at least a decade before the actual proceedings (Myint Myint Oo 2011a, 87). Finished on May 4th, 1868, King Mindon claimed that his inscriptions were based on the Bagan copies of the Tipiṭaka, but he also checked his MSS against those from Thailand and Sri Lanka (Nyein Chan Maung 2006, 21). In addition to the religious motivations of King Mindon, he convened the Fifth Council to consolidate his power domestically at a time when British forces

³⁸ For the most detailed study of these stelae in English and their legacy in subsequent printed editions of the Tipiṭaka, see Royce Wiles et al. (2021). François Tainturier also covers the Fifth Council and the marble stelae in Chapter Six of his book, *Mandalay and the Art of Building Cities in Burma* (2021, 180–85).

were threatening to engulf his now landlocked kingdom. His goal was not only to win the support of his subjects through *sāsana* promotion activities,³⁹ but also to assert a measure of control over a monastic community that had been split between Upper and Lower Burma, the latter then under British control since the Second Anglo-Burmese war of 1852-1853.

One way to assert this control was to standardise the texts on which monastics relied to govern themselves, conduct ritual, and interpret doctrine. Hence an important aspect of the Fifth Council that needs to be recognised is that it represented, or at least solidified, a move from a less restricted notion of the Tipiṭaka to what scholars today call the “Pali canon.” Peter Skilling describes this move in South and Southeast Asia as “a reinterpretation of the word Tripiṭaka at the close of the nineteenth century” (Skilling 2014, 361). For there is a substantial difference between the concepts of ‘Tipiṭaka’ and ‘Pali canon,’ as K.R. Norman explains: “the word ‘*tipiṭaka*’ is not synonymous with ‘canon’. *Tipiṭaka* is a division of texts rather than an assessment of their authority” ([1992] 2012, 133). In contrast, the concept of the “canon” can be defined as “a collection of scriptures (oral or written), which gives a certain authority to those texts included in it. The collection may be open, giving the possibility of other texts being added to it, or closed, which implies that the texts listed in it, *and no others*, are documents

³⁹ We may translate “*sāsana*” as the body of teachings emanating from the historical Buddha, a Pali corpus that was formalized in oral form by guilds of “reciters” (P. *bhāṇakas*), further standardized in writing just before the turn of the common era and passed down through generations of monastics and lay scholars since in multiple media and through layers of edition, revision, and emendation. Alicia Turner, however, points out that “*sāsana* has come to include not just [the Buddha’s] teaching as a body of knowledge but the living practice of following the teachings and the conditions of their flourishing” (Turner 2014, 26). This second more dynamic way of defining the *sāsana* brings out the epistemological aspect of this term, but we can go even further, for to people in Theravada nations like Burma, the *sāsana* is also the bridge that connects normal worldlings with the buddhas past, present, and future, and in this sense, *sāsana* also has more of a metaphysical, transcendental quality that goes beyond just simply teachings, more than just their actualization, but connects the human realm with something altogether different. In this way, Turner’s insight is important, namely that “viewed historically, the meaning of *sāsana* was never fixed or singular. It was fluid, re-inflected, and reinvented with each new instance of *sāsana* reform” (Turner 2014, 136).

fundamental to the religion concerned” (Norman [1992] 2012, 131) (*italics in original*). While the concept of Tipiṭaka is not without authority, it is of a different nature than the kind of authority ascribed and, more importantly, enforced by a monarch like King Mindon and his ministers, some of whom were directly responsible for meting out punishment to those who flouted the king’s religious orders. This sense of authority is rooted in the idea of the closed canon, or what Skilling calls “an exclusive Tipiṭaka” (2014, 361), where the legitimacy of existing texts cannot be impugned and, more critically, no new texts can be included, even if they enjoy local prestige, semi-official status, or wide circulation. The exclusivity here operates on at least two levels: both in terms of the type of texts sanctioned, but also in their linguistic medium. The Tipiṭaka more broadly construed probably contained texts in the vernacular, or at least Pali texts supported by and supplemented with local linguistic registers. An exclusive Tipiṭaka, however, must contain only “pure” Pali, and is thereby accessible to only an elite clique of scholars and monks who require specialist training to approach, interpret, and oversee the texts therein.

This closed “Pali canon” is what has prevailed in South and Southeast Asia since the end of the nineteenth century, at least on a national level, enforced by governments through a combination of monastic court systems, ministries of religion, and scripture publishing campaigns.⁴⁰ Before this concept of the closed canon was enforced through such mechanisms,

⁴⁰ I specify “national level” because as Steven Collins (1990), Anne M. Blackburn (1999), Justin McDaniel (2008), and others have shown, Buddhist texts in more localised, monastery-level settings do not always match with the idealised, conceptual, or in the words of Blackburn, “formal” canons (1999, 283) as perceived by scholars or nation states. The comments above about the exclusive canon are aimed at this second, higher-level conception of the canon, but part of my point is that it is this formal canon that has acted on and against what Blackburn (*sensu* Collins) calls the “practical” canon, which “refers to *the units of text actually employed in the practices of collecting manuscripts, copying them, reading them, commenting on them, listening to them, and preaching sermons based upon them that are understood by their users as part of a tipitaka-based tradition*” (Blackburn 1999, 284) (*italics in original*). Hence while my argument applies mostly to the exclusive, formal Tipiṭaka, it is also at the practical

“when a Siamese king,” for example, “sponsored a Tripiṭaka, this entailed collecting and copying *all* available Pali texts (and even a few bilinguals) belonging to *all* categories, including not only the classical texts of the Mahāvihāra—the ‘Pali literature of Ceylon’—but also the commentaries, sub-commentaries, manuals, handbooks, and chronicles, along with an assortment of ‘apocryphal’—or what I have called ‘non-classical’—Pali texts” (Skilling 2014, 361) (italics in original). In the same vein, Janaka Ashin observes that there was “a substantial range of Theravada literature that until at least the end of the 19th century was in various regions widely accepted as authoritative and canonical, but which nonetheless has not been included in any of the editions of the Pali Canon” (Janaka Ashin 2016, 238). It was precisely this “substantial range of Theravada literature” which was omitted from the Fifth Council project, Pali texts that included regional chronicles (P. *vamsas*), apocryphal *jātakas*, Pali grammars, works on meditation,⁴¹ *vinaya* handbooks, even vernacular legal texts (ဓမ္မသတ် *dhammasat* P. *dhammasattha*),⁴² and various levels of Pali, vernacular, and bilingual sub-exegeses thereon, even though, as Alexey Kirichenko claims, “the authenticity of many of the[se texts] was hotly debated as Burmese Buddhism was moving toward the conception of” an exclusive Tipiṭaka (Kirichenko 2015, 806), or what we may more accurately call an exclusive canon. These debates seem to have been largely resolved or repressed by the convening of the Fifth Council, or rather, by the preparatory editorial work, which began in earnest at least a decade prior and appeared to

canons that an event like the Fifth Council is targeted, even if it is less than successful in regulating what is produced and consumed by smaller scale, scattered textual communities.

⁴¹ For more on the suppression of meditation texts during this period, see Crosby (2013; 2020).

⁴² As Christian Lammerts points out, the “canonicity” of the *dhammathats* was in fact a matter of considerable debate in pre- and early modern Burma, and many “bibliographic treatises were written by different monks to negotiate conflicting opinions about the contents of the *piṭakat* corpus,” especially when it came to the place of *dhammathats* and other forms of “secular” or “*lokiya*” (worldly) knowledge vis-à-vis the Tipiṭaka (D. Christian Lammerts 2018, 138).

be more “consonant with the modernist and historicist aspirations of the age” (Skilling 2014, 361). The Fifth Council was so successful in closing off the canon, that “[b]y the mid-20th century, the majority of these [excluded] texts were almost completely forgotten” (Kirichenko 2015, 806). It seems that it was this sense of a closed canon that Duroiselle was invoking when reacting to Bode, an “exclusive Tripiṭaka prescribed by the Lankan Pali exegetical tradition of Buddhaghosa and others” (Skilling 2014, 361). Since the classical *aṭṭhakathās* of Buddhaghosa and others did not include the Mil in the Tripiṭaka, Duroiselle found it unfathomable that the Burmese did not follow this same convention. For him, the texts of the Tripiṭaka appear to have been fixed in time, transcending the vagaries of recension histories and the production of new literature in regionalised Theravada communities.

While I argue that the Fifth Council was a formative moment in the creation of the current closed canon, is it probably not unique: for it is likely that the Tripiṭaka has in fact been “closed” and “opened” several times throughout the histories of Theravada Buddhism, that rather than a single historical moment that can be isolated, the process of exclusion and inclusion has been more cyclical, localized, and syncopated, with a strict sense of the canon giving way to laxer standards and less enforcement gradually, only to be reinforced by subsequent kings and new regimes with shifting geographic boundaries and textual definitions. Indeed, the same kinds of trends that led to the Fifth Council can be seen in Burma almost a century before in King Bodawpaya’s royal orders. As William Pruitt points out, “le 6 décembre 1785, le roi annonce que si ‘l’on veut corriger une orthographe ancienne, on doit citer les texts qui font autorité en présence de religieux érudits et des ministers. Le 29 du même mois, il proclame que l’orthographe qu’il a établie ne peut être remise en question; ceux qui écrivent les mots autrement doivent être punis” (Pruitt 1994, 24). What is remarkable about these orders is not just the fact that those who

wish to revise previous Pali MSS must “cite authoritative texts in the presence of religious scholars and ministers,” but that anyone who questions the orthography established by the king “must be punished.” King Bodawpaya even sent scholars to India to search for Pali texts written in “l’écriture du Magadha,” which he considered to be “la seule écriture correcte pour les copies du Piṭaka,” but unsurprisingly, his missions were unsuccessful (Pruitt 1994, 25). Thus, the impetus of King Mindon to “correct” and “close” the Tipiṭaka is not unique but was probably inherited from his predecessors in Burma and modelled on neighboring or historical kingdoms. Yet my point is that the instantiation of the closed canon of Burma over the last century and a half is partly the result of the Fifth Council that solidified these earlier trends, powerfully symbolised by the incision of the accepted texts on marble slabs meant, in the words of King Mindon, “to last till the end of the world” (Myint Myint Oo 2011a, 87).

1.4 *Milindapañha* and the Fifth Council

When examining the records of the Fifth Council, at least via the work of Burmese scholars, it appears the place of the Mil is still liminal. In their accounts of the teams assigned to edit the texts of the *Khuddakanikāya* for the marble stelae of the Fifth Council, Nyein Chan Maung (2006, 20) and Myint Myint Oo (2011a, 83) confirm that the *Vimānavatthu*, the *Petavatthu* and its *aṭṭhakathā*, the Nett and its *aṭṭhakathā*, and the Peṭ were under the supervision of the Meiktila Sayadaw mentioned above. As convenor of the council and a personal consultant of King Mindon, the Meiktila Sayadaw was one of the most eminent monastics at the council, indicating that these texts, the last of the *Khuddakanikāya*, were considered important or at least posed a challenge to properly edit. Since the Mil is usually grouped with the Nett and the Peṭ, it should also fall under the purview of this editing team. Yet in both scholars’ accounts of the Meiktila



Figure 1: Completion date of the inscription of the first *Milindapañha* stele found on the bottom of the back of the stele. Picture Courtesy of the Kuthodaw Pagoda Project

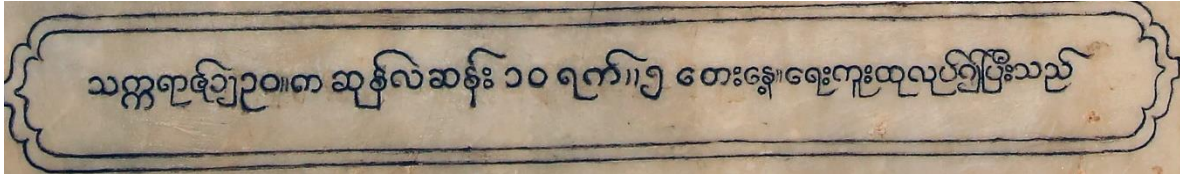


Figure 2: Completion date of the inscription of the last *Milindapañha* stele, found on the bottom of the back of the stele. Picture Courtesy of the Kuthodaw Pagoda Project

Sayadaw’s editing duties, the Mil is omitted, nor is it found under the purview of any other team of editors, whether those who oversaw the Suttantapiṭaka or Abhidhammapiṭaka.⁴³ This omission is a curious detail, for Myint Myint Oo offers a list of the stelae from the council that includes the “*Milindapañha-pāli* as the last text of the *Khuddakanikāya* at 20 slabs” (Myint Myint Oo 2011a, 99), indicating that he was aware of its position as the last text in the *Khuddakanikāya*.⁴⁴ Hence the apparent fact that no editorial team was assigned the task of reviewing the Mil leaves open the possibility that its 20 stelae were added to the site as a last minute decision.

Architecturally speaking, this scenario is likely, since the stelae of the Vinayapiṭaka are found in

⁴³ While Nyein Chan Maung does not indicate the source of his information, Myint Myint Oo, according to his bibliography, takes the information about the editorial purviews of different sayadaws and lay scholars from: Ācara, U. *Gandhālacakkajotiṭṭhādīpanī kyan*. Yangon: Ministry of Religious Affairs Press, 1981. 164-166, and Paññāsāmi, U. *Akkharāvisodhanī kyan*. Mandalay: Yadanardepan Press, 1953. 56-58.

⁴⁴ Myint Myint Oo has compiled this list based on the *Kunḥ bhoṇ chak mahārāja wañ tau krīḥ* (*Great Chronicle on the Konbaung Dynasty*),⁴⁴ an unsanctioned history of the Konbaung Dynasty first compiled in 1905 by the Burmese scholar Maung Maung Tin (*Moñ Moñ Tin*), with a subsequent edition in 1921 or 1922 (Hla Pe 1985, 58).⁴⁴ This work was “unsanctioned” because it came after the fall of the dynasty itself in 1885, covering the years 1854-1916 (Hla Pe 1985, 58).

the inner wall of the Kuthodaw Pagoda, the Abhidhammapiṭaka is found in the middle wall, while the stelae for the Suttantapitaka are found in the outer wall (Bollée 1968, 294), implying that the Suttantapitaka texts were the last to be set in place. The dates carved into the bottom of the back of each stele confirms this fact, for the “first Vinaya slab with a date states the year 1223/1861 (Bollée 1968, 494). In contrast, the date of completion on the first stele of the Mil is 1229 (1867), the 7th day of the month of Tagu (တန့်ခူး *tan khūh*) (March-April) (see figure 1), while the last stele has the completion date of 1230 (1868), the 10th day of the month of Kason (တဆုန် *ka chun*) (April-May) (see figure 2).⁴⁵ These dates imply a year-long effort of the scribes in preparing the 20 stelae for the Mil and suggest that this text was finished just before the completion of the project as a whole on May 4th, 1868.⁴⁶ If, then, the Mil was one of the terminal set of stelae added to the Kuthodaw Pagoda, perhaps it was too late to be a part of the official editing process and was a last-minute decision or the subject of an 11th-hour dispute among the editors themselves? Alternately, perhaps the debate over the inclusion of this text lasted until the final year of incision work, was decided after all the other texts had been officially edited, or was included unilaterally without consensus of the monks? All these scenarios are possible, but the lack of a team assigned to edit the Mil warrants more research into the original documents of the Fifth Council, the chronicles, and the historical layers of the stelae themselves.

With this (admittedly opaque) history of the Mil in the Fifth Council in hand, how is one to explain the objection raised by Duroiselle against Bode above, based on his observation that

⁴⁵ I would like to thank the Kuthodaw Pagoda Project, members Mark Allon, Chris Clark, Tamara Ditrich, and Royce Wiles, for making these images of the Mil stelae available to me.

⁴⁶ According to Chris Clark (personal communication, January 2021), the *Mahāniddesa* was inscribed between October 1867 and May 1868, which means it would also be one of the last texts to be finished, just after of just before the Mil.

“in the Piṭakattha-main itself (p. 17) the mention of these four works is separated from that of the books of the Khuddaka by a Pāli stanza and its translation, in which it is said that the Khuddaka has only 15 books” (1911, 120–21)? Coming two decades after the completion of the Fifth Council stela, the particular *Piṭakat sa muṅh* (ပိဋကတော်ဝင်မုခ်) Duroiselle mentions, a catalogue of the contents of the Tipiṭaka, was composed in 1888 by “Mañ krī Mahāsiriṅyasū, the last librarian of the royal Burmese library at Mandalay” (von Hinüber 2000, 3). Since the work was produced by the royal librarian, he almost certainly followed the lead of the Fifth Council edition, at least in terms of the exclusive canon. While Duroiselle is right to point out the separation of these four texts (i.e., the *Suttasaṅgha*,⁴⁷ Mil, Peṭ, and the Nett) from the list of the 15 accepted *Khuddakanikāya* texts, it is not clear that his interpretation of these four books as mere educational supplements is correct. A clue to how the Fifth Council editors and the royal librarian might have approached the situation is provided by Jackson, who points out that in the *Sīlakkhandhavagga-abhinavaṭṭikā* of Ñāṇābhivamsa, a work “completed, according to the closing verses, in 2345 B.E. [~1801 C.E.]” (2006, 62), the once Mahāsaṅgharājā (“the king of the great *saṅgha*”) of Burma writes the following: “And here Cariyapīṭaka and Buddhavaṃsa are not taken because they go under Jātaka; and Netti, Peṭakopadesa, *and so on*, because they go under Niddesa and/or Paṭisambhidāmagga”⁴⁸ (Jackson 2006, 62) (italics added). This comment by Ñāṇābhivamsa comes in his discussion on the dispute about the *Khuddakanikāya* between the *dīghabhāṇakā* (reciters of the *Dīghanikāya*) and *majjhimbhāṇakā* (reciters of the

⁴⁷ With Bode’s comment notwithstanding, the *Suttasaṅgha*, which is outside the scope of this thesis, is not found in Myint Myint Oo’s list of texts included in the Fifth Council and certainly was not accepted in the Sixth Council proceedings as far as I am aware.

⁴⁸ *cariyapīṭaka-buddhavaṃsañcetha aggahaṇaṃ jātakagatikattā, netti-peṭakopadesādīmañca niddesa-paṭisambhidāmaggagatikattā*, Page 84¹²⁻¹³ of *Sīlakkhandavagga-abhinavaṭṭī (Paṭhama bhāgo)*. Yangon: Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2008.

Majjhimanikāya), namely, on “whether the *Khuddakanikāya* (*Khuddaka-gantha*) belongs to the *Suttanta-piṭaka* or *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*. The *Dīghabhāṇakā* insist[ing] that it belongs to the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* while the *Majjhimbhāṇakā* maintain[ing] that it belongs to the *Suttanta-piṭaka*” (Endo 2013, 239). In addition to this dispute, the different *bhāṇaka* groups offered divergent lists on the actual texts contained in the *Khuddakanikāya*, with the *Dīghabhāṇakā* omitting the *Cariyāpiṭaka*, *Apadāna*, and *Buddhavaṃsa* (Endo 2013, 233). According to Jackson, in “the first half of the sentence [in the *Sīlakkhandhavagga-abhinavaṭṭikā* above], which is carried over from the old *ṭṭikā*, Ñāṇābhivaṃsa is claiming that there was no substantive difference on the contents of the Canon between the reciters: that the Dīgha reciters really did recognize e.g. the *Cariyāpiṭaka* as canonical, but counted it as part of the *Jātaka* rather than a separate book” (Jackson 2006, 62). Jackson goes on to clarify that “in the second half [of the sentence, Ñāṇābhivaṃsa] is claiming that Buddhaghosa and all the other classical authorities considered the *Netti* [and *Peṭ*] to be canonical, but counted it as part of the *Niddesa* or *Paṭisambhidāmagga* when they listed the books of the *Khuddakanikāya*” (Jackson 2006, 62). In other words, it is not that these texts were excluded from the *Tipiṭaka*, according to Ñāṇābhivaṃsa, merely that they were subsumed under different headings.

The insight of Jackson here is critical since it elucidates how premodern Buddhists sought ways to justify their own regional, less-exclusive conceptions of the *Tipiṭaka* with what they saw in the *aṭṭhakathās* and other “classical authorities.” Though Jackson does not explicitly say as much, his observations open up the possibility that the reason the compiler of the *Piṭakat sa muṇḥ* separated the 15 accepted books of the *Khuddakanikāya* from the four “additions” is because Ñāṇābhivaṃsa’s argument was already incorporated into this way of thinking, that these four were once subsumed under the headings of the 15 accepted texts. As a former head of the

Burmese *saṅgha* writing less than a century before Mañ krī Mahāsiriyejyasū, it is likely that Ñāṇābhivaṃsa’s views were well known and even consulted by the author of the *Piṭakat sa muṅḥ* on this issue. If so, rather than indicating their separation from the 15 texts, as Duroiselle argued, perhaps the verse in the *Piṭakat sa muṅḥ* was meant to show the inherent inclusion of the texts that immediately followed. In other words, the function of the verse was not disjunctive, but rather conjunctive, making explicit something implicit. The evidence is underdetermined in either case, but it seems Duroiselle’s emphatic refutation of Bode’s observation is overstated. There certainly is ambiguity about the place of the Mil and the other texts vis-à-vis the *Khuddakanikāya* in Burma, but the situation is certainly more nuanced than Duroiselle asserts.

Exploring this nuance even further, it is possible to extrapolate Jackson’s argument by noting that when Ñāṇābhivaṃsa names the Nett and Peṭ, he adds “*ādīnaṃ*” to this *dvanda*, copulative compound, which is rendered in Jackson’s translation above as the “Netti, Peṭakopadesa, and so on” (emphasis added). Could the noun *ādīnaṃ* then be referring to the Mil as well? With the notion of the exclusive canon now firmly entrenched in our mind, it is hard to contemplate how the Mil could be subsumed under the *Niddesa* or *Paṭisambhidamagga*, but perhaps such thinking was not foreign during the time of Ñāṇābhivaṃsa. Indeed, it is possible this “*ādīnaṃ*” was one loophole that allowed the Fifth Council editors and Mañ krī Mahāsiriyejyasū to include the Mil in the exclusive canon they were crafting, even though this text was not explicitly mentioned in the *aṭṭhakathās* as part of the *Khuddakanikāya*. Likely the Fifth Council editors and Mañ krī Mahāsiriyejyasū were responding more to the *de facto* state of the Tipiṭaka in their time, as there is evidence that the Nett and the Mil enjoyed unofficial “canonical status” in the nineteenth century and before, as Ñāṇābhivaṃsa’s apologetics suggest. In fact, Ñāṇābhivaṃsa is said to have composed a *ṭīkā* (subcommentary) on the Nett now lost

(Ñāṇatusita, 2008, 22), implying the high esteem he afforded this text considered paracanonical in other Theravada regions. With regards to the Mil, there is epigraphic evidence that this text held a high position in premodern Burma. Christian Lammerts informs us of a “donative stone inscription of 1986 of the *Sāsana* era (1442 CE) from a monastery in Pagan” where the Mil is listed in a rather expansive class of *sutta* works, along with *dhammasat* legal texts, “Sanskrit śāstric materials,” and the *Subhodhālankāra* (D. Christian Lammerts 2018, 29), a 12th-century “Pali treatise on rhetoric in 367 verses” (Wright 2002, 323). Moving to the eighteenth century, there is a “stone inscription erected in 1767 during the reign of King Hsinbyushin” (ဆင်ဖြူရှင်မင်း: Chañ phrū rhañ mañḥ) that contains a partial reproduction of the simile of the “Blessed One’s Bazaar” (P. *bhagavato sabbāpaṇaṃ*) found in the Mil (341,³-347,²¹) (Tainturier 2021, 194). The simile of the Blessed One’s Bazaar represents the ideal Buddhist abode, the “City of Dhamma” (P. *dhamma-nagaraṃ*) in the text, a place that supplies, in the way of the “ninefold words of the Buddha” (P. *navangaṃ buddha-vacanaṃ*), the Buddha’s “bodily relics” (P. *sārīrikāni cetiyāni*), his “relics of use” (P. *pāribhogakāni cetiyāni*), and the “jewel of the *saṅgha*” (P. *saṅgha-ratanaṃ*), the ideal conditions for its citizens to reach *nibbāna*.

Apart from being just an abstract concept, François Tainturier argues that King Mindon deployed this simile as a “model for action” when planning and constructing the outer city of his new royal capital, Mandalay, in 1857 (Tainturier 2021, 164). By taking this simile found in the Mil as a “blueprint” for his city building project, King Mindon “materialized” aspects of this text and “localized its manifestation” in Burma (Tainturier 2021, 190), thereby “reasserting [his] land as Buddha-*desa*” and positioning himself as a protector and propagator of the *sāsana* (Tainturier 2021, 192). Tainturier even suggests that the Fifth Council was King Mindon’s attempt to “materialize” the ninefold words of the Buddha, one of the four aspects of the Blessed One’s

Bazaar, and that the monarch was making such “spiritual merchandise” freely available to his subjects by installing the stone slabs in the Kuthodaw Pagoda, just outside of the inner city walls (Tainturier 2021, 180). In this sense, the Mil is part inspiration for the Fifth Council itself. Given the importance of this text in Burma and especially in the galatic polity of King Mindon, the Fifth Council editors and Mañ krī Mahāsiriḷeyasū needed to account for the absence of the Mil from the enumerations of the *Khuddakanikāya* in the *aṭṭhakathā* and find a creative reason to include it in the emerging exclusive canon. Apart from such motivations, it is difficult to be sure what logic the editors of the Fifth Council were operating on, as the discussion above is only speculative, but further insight is provided from those participating in the Sixth Council and the subsequent *Tipiṭaka abhidhān* some eight decades later.

1.5 *Milindapañha* and the Sixth Council

While the Sixth Council followed the lead of King Mindon and cemented the place of the Mil in the *Khuddakanikāya* and thus in the exclusive canon of present-day Burma, the issue was contentious during the proceedings itself. In a nod to the (mostly nominal) international character of the events, the fifth and last session (*pañcama sannipāta*) of the Sixth Council proper was known as the Sri Lankan Session,⁴⁹ presided over by the Vælivīṭa Dharmakīrti Asaraṇa Saraṇa Śrī Saraṇamkara Mahānāyaka Thera of the Malwatte chapter of the Siyam Mahānikāya in Sri Lanka (*Chaṭṭha Sangāyana Souvenir Album* 1956, 212).⁵⁰ This session, beginning April 23rd,

⁴⁹ I say “the Sixth Council proper” because the proceedings actually continued until February 16th, 1962 (Janaka Ashin 2016, 84), just before the fall of the parliamentary system. After this fifth session, the council turned its attention to the commentaries and subcommentaries, becoming a mostly bureaucratic and scholarly affair which did not require nor attract the same level of pageantry and public interest.

⁵⁰ I would like to thank Nilmani Goonetilleke for her assistance in identifying this figure.

1956 and ending a month later on May 24th, was inaugurated by Jayaweera Kuruppu, Minister of Religious and Cultural Affairs of Sri Lanka, the first such minister in that country (*Chaṭṭha Sangāyana Souvenir Album* 1956, 212). The intent of this session was to finish the recitation of the *Khuddakanikāya*, focusing on the two volumes of the *Jātaka*, the *Paṭisambhidhamagga*, Nett, Peṭ, and the Mil, the last set of texts to be recited at the council (*Chaṭṭha Sangāyana Souvenir Album* 1956, 225).

Yet during this session, there “arose disagreement between the two sides of Sri Lankan and Myanmar Mahātheras” concerning these last three texts (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 202). Myat Myat Htun explains that the “Sri Lankan Mahātheras put up their statements to the meeting that the aforesaid three treatises should not be included in the list of Pāḷi Piṭaka Texts and if they were recognized as the texts in the Chaṭṭha Saṃgāyanā [Sixth Council], the Sattama Saṃgāyanā [Seventh Council] would have to be held in either Sri Lanka or Thailand” (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 202). While this disagreement is not unsurprising since these three texts are excluded from the Tipiṭāka in Sri Lanka and Thailand, what is surprising is that several Burmese monks agreed with their Sri Lankan counterparts, including the lead questioner (P. *pucchaka*),⁵¹ the Mahasi, and the lead respondent (P. *vissajjanaka*), the Mingun Sayadaw (မင်းကွန်းဆရာတော် Mañḥ kvanḥ Cha rā tau, a.k.a. ဦးဝိစိတ္တသရဘိဝံသ Ūḥ Vicittasarabhivamsa, 1911-1993) (Myat Myat Htun

⁵¹ Along with being the lead questioner, the Mahasi was also a lead editor (P. *osānaka*) (Ei Ei Lwin 2011, 18; Tin Than Myint 2008, 83), tasked as part of the *pāḷivisodhaka* (“Pali purifiers”) team with ensuring the final copies of texts were free from error before being recited at the Sixth Council. His role as lead questioner might have been by accident, however, as when the proceedings commenced, the Mahāvihayārāma Sayadaw, Ūḥ Javana from Pakokku, more senior than the Mahasi with the honorary title “Abhidhajamahārattḥaguru” (“Utmost Great Teacher of the Nation”) was slated to act as questioner (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 170). According to members of the Mahasi lineage alive today, the Mahāvihayārāma Sayadaw was unable to take up his role given his advanced age and the pressure of the moment, and the Mahasi seems to have been a last-minute replacement starting from the second day onwards.

2006, 202).⁵² Myat Myat Htun states that “although [the] Mingun Sayadaw showed some 14 points of defects with regard to [the] Mil, [the] Nyaungyan Sayadawgyi discussed about [the] Mil [in the] Saṅgīti Visajjanā and [the] Netti, Peṭakopadesa [in the] Saṅgītivisajjanā, and thus, they were recited in Chattha Saṃgāyanā with the agreement of the Saṃgha” (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 202). By this time the Nyaungyan Sayadaw (ညောင်ရမ်းဆရာတော် Ñāṇoṅ ramḥ Cha rā tau, a.k.a. ရှင်ရေဝတ Rhañ revata, 1874-1955; hereafter the Nyaungyan), former Chairman of the Sixth Council itself, had passed away, as a memorial statue in his honour was unveiled to begin this fifth session (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 201). Though it is not entirely clear from Myat Myat Htun’s citation and bibliography, the “*Saṅgīti Visajjanā*,” which means “*Answers about the [Sixth] Council*,” could refer to the *Saṃgāyanā ameh aphre* (သံဂါယနာအမေးအဖြေ *Questions and Answers about the [Sixth] Council*), which “record the formal exchanges between” the Mahasi and the Mingun Sayadaw during the proceedings, but as these texts were “published between 1954 and 1967” (Clark 2015, 100), it is unlikely they were used to settle this specific dispute, unless the Nyaungyan had already composed introductory sections for each session which were in circulation amongst the participants. Alternatively, by “*Saṅgīti Visajjanā*,” Myat Myat Htun may be referring to the *Milindapañhā-netti-petakopadesa-saṅgīti Vinicchaya* (*Judgement on the Recitation of the Peṭakopadesa, Netti[ppakarāṇa] and the Milindapañhā*), which Aye Aye Chaw lists as one of the 132 works authored by the Nyaungyan (Aye Aye Chaw 2010, 163).⁵³ In addition, the 14 points that the Mingun Sayadaw raised were never published, in

⁵² Myat Myat Htun adds that the Mahāgandhāyone Sayadaw (မဟာဂန္ဓာရုံဆရာတော် Mahāgandharuṃ Cha rā tau) from Amarapura also dissented to including these texts in the Sixth Council (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 202).

⁵³ Aye Aye Chaw also attribute a *Milindapañhā-vāda-otarāṇa-kathā* (*Discourse Entering into the Theory of the Milindapañhā*) to the Nyaungyan (Aye Aye Chaw 2010, 163), which from the title appears to be more of a doctrinal treatise on the text as opposed to a justification of its place in the Tipiṭaka on text-historical grounds.

part no doubt because they fly in the face of some of the editorial decisions made in the inclusion of these texts and undermine the appearance of international acceptance of the Sixth Council Tipiṭaka.⁵⁴ Indeed, it is unlikely that there was unanimous acceptance of these three texts by the Sri Lankan and Thai delegations, for the *Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Souvenir Album* does not review the proceedings of this fifth session as it does for all other sessions, perhaps indicating that the issues around the Peṭ and Mil were never truly resolved.⁵⁵ Further evidence of this dissonance closing to the Sixth Council is the fact that the government of Sri Lanka actually did sponsor a *saṅgāyana* of their own, which “convened at the end of the Jayanti year, in May, 1957” (Bond 1988, 79). Perhaps the Sri Lankan delegation actually did follow through on their threat.⁵⁶

At present I have been unable to locate a *Saṅgīti Visajjanā* for the Mil or a *Samgāyanā ameh aphre* for the *Khuddakanikāya* specifically,⁵⁷ but I suspect similar arguments were taken

⁵⁴ Myat Myat Htun has indicated to me (personal communication, August 2020) that the handwritten MS of the Mingun Sayadaw on these points may still be found in the museum of the Mingun Tipiṭaka Nikāya Association, Yangon (or the Tipiṭaka Nikāya Sasana Organization?). She only came to know of their existence through an article written by Zeyya Maung, former rector of the Mandalay State Sāsana Pariyatti University. Zeyya Maung. “Evaṃ me sutam.” *Mingun Tipiṭaka Nikāya Association Dutiya Three Year’s Journey*. Yangon: Tipiṭaka Nikāya Sāsana Phrū Aphvai, 1987: 589.

⁵⁵ It is also possible that the souvenir album was simply published before the fifth session ended, since to conclude the book, it states that “due to the necessity of producing the album to synchronise with the concluding ceremonies we have not been able to include the messages and speeches delivered at those [final] ceremonies” (1956, 234).

⁵⁶ Bond explains that “the government set up in 1954 the Lanka Bauddha Mandalaya, the Buddhist Council of Ceylon, which outlined a series of celebrations and projects to commemorate the event” of the halfway point of the *sāsana* (Bond 1988, 79). It is not clear from his account when the idea of a council arose from this council, but the very nature of the council appears to mimic the Buddha Sāsana Council organized by U Nu, and it is possible they adopted much of their program from Burma. The fact that Sri Lanka also began publishing its own “Buddhajayantī Tripiṭaka series in Sinhala script” is further evidence of their dissatisfaction with the Sixth Council edition, several readings of which were criticized by a Sri Lankan editor, Venerable Kodāgoḍa Ñāṇāloka Nāyaka, in the *Buddhajayantī Tripiṭaka* edition (Clark 2015, 107).

⁵⁷ The Kaba Aye Buddha Research Library, hosted on the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ website, appears to include a *Samgāyanā ameh aphre* for all the texts except for the *Khuddakanikāya*. There is a *Samgāyanā ameh aphre* listed as covering the Abhidhamma and the *Khuddakanikāya* on its front cover, but it does not contain information on the latter and ends after its explanation of the former.

up by the editors of the *Tipiṭaka abhidhān* for the inclusion of the Mil. Introduced above, this dictionary, at 22 volumes and still unfinished, was an outgrowth of the Sixth Council itself. As Myat Myat Htun has detailed, “U Nu, the Prime Minister[,] urged [the] Minister for Religious Affairs[,] U Win,” during a meeting at the former’s home in 1950, that “a Tipiṭaka Pāli-Myanmar Dictionary should be undertaken under the sponsorship of [the] Religious Minister” (2006, 120). As indicated by Myint Myint Oo in a single sentence without discussion or translation (2011a, 100), the Ñānuttara Sayadaw (ဉာနုတ္တရဆရာတော် Ñānuttara Cha rā tau, henceforth the Nanuttara), who compiled the *nidāna* for the first volume of the dictionary, explains the reasons why the Mil was included in the Fifth and Sixth Councils as part of the

Khuddakanikāya:

although [this] text emerged in a later period, the *Milindapañha* is a text that explains the concerns that [seem] like difficult irregularities on the surface [of] Buddhism in [accordance with] the Buddha’s sacred wish and it is definitely received [with] veneration similarly to the Buddha’s teaching[s]. It can be seen that the master of the *aṭṭhakathās*, Ashin Mahā Buddhaghosa also cites even the *Milindapañha* to give the solutions in those places [where] there is an urgent explanation [needed] in his own *aṭṭhakathās*. After [the time] of this *Milindapañha*, texts fit to be acknowledged as Pali [i.e., scriptural] truly did not emerge. It can be said that the era of Pali literature was concluded and completed with the *Milindapañha*.⁵⁸ (Ñānuttara 1964, 27)

The first element of the argument in favour of including the Mil in the *Khuddakanikāya* picks up on the idea expressed above by Bond, namely, that in the commentaries, “the Theravadins came

⁵⁸နောက်ကျသောကာလမှ ပေါ်လာသောကျမ်းဖြစ်သော်လည်း မိလိန္ဒပဉ္စကကျမ်းသည် ဗုဒ္ဓဝါဒဆိုင်ရာ ခဲရာခဲဆစ် အဖုအထစ်သဖွယ်ဖြစ်သော အရာဌာနတို့ကို ဘုရားရှင်အလိုတော်ကျ ဖြေရှင်းပြ သော ကျမ်းဖြစ်၍ ဘုရားဟောနှင့်မခြား အလားတူပင် အလေးပြုခြင်းကို ခံခဲ့ရပေသည်။ အဋ္ဌကထာ ဆရာ အရှင်မဟာဗုဒ္ဓဃောသသည်လည်း မိမိ၏အဋ္ဌကထာတို့တွင် အရေးတကြီးဖြေရှင်းဖွယ်ရှိသော နေရာဌာနတို့၌ မိလိန္ဒပဉ္စကကျမ်းကိုပင် ထုတ်ဖော်ကိုးကား၍ ဖြေရှင်းခဲ့သည်များကို တွေ့ရပေသည်။ ဤမိလိန္ဒပဉ္စကကျမ်း၏ နောက်၌ကား ပါဠိတော်ကဲ့သို့ အသိအမှတ်ပြုအပ်သည့်ကျမ်းများ မပေါ်ထွက်တော့ချေ။ ပါဠိတော်စာပေခေတ်မှာ မိလိန္ဒပဉ္စကကျမ်းဖြင့် အဆုံးသတ် နိဂုံးချုပ်သွားသည်ဟု ပင် ဆိုရပေမည် (1964, 27).

to distinguish between ‘the word of the Buddha’ that Gotama ‘spoke’ only with his mind or his wisdom and that which he actually uttered” (Bond 1982, 31). In the excerpt above from the *Tipiṭaka abhidhān*, it is not claimed that the Buddha “spoke” the Mil, but given the prophecy attributed to him about the emergence of Nāgasena and Milinda, which was cited in the paragraph just before the quote above,⁵⁹ the Nanuttara is making the case that the Mil is in accordance with the “Buddha’s sacred wish” (ဘုရားရှင်အလိုတော် *bhu rāḥ rhañ alui tau*), implying that the Buddha would have replied to Milinda in the same manner as Nāgasena. Hence what is seen here is a twentieth-century iteration of the *buddhavacana* concept, which states that the Mil reflects the Buddha’s teaching, and even more, that it represents the Buddha’s sacred will, carrying on his own missionizing project into the future 500 years after his *parinibbāna*.

The second element here is more text critical in that the *aṭṭhakathā* texts ascribed to Buddhaghosa are seen as the determining factor in the canonicity or non-canonicity of a text. This point is stressed when the Nanuttara writes that the Mil is resorted to “in those places [where] there is an urgent explanation” needed. It is precisely in such urgent and inextricable problems that the Mil specialises. When framed in this manner, the Nanuttara is claiming that Buddhaghosa resorted to the Mil in the same way as one would to the actual words uttered by the Buddha, but perhaps with more clarificatory potential, since the task of this text is to “explain the

⁵⁹ The quote in question from the *nidāna* to the *Tipiṭaka abhidhān* is as follows: “[Like the Nett and the Peṭ], the *Milindapañha* is certainly also a text that emerged during a very late period. It should be elaborated: according to the words that have come down in the *Milindapañha* ([pg.] 3) that says ‘500 rainy seasons...’ [(Mil 3, 19-25)] Ashin Nāgasena and King Milinda are extraordinary people [who] appeared more than 500 years after the exalted Buddha completed [his] *parinibbāna*” မိလိန္ဒပဉ္စကုဿ်သည်လည်း အလွန်နောက်ကျသောခေတ်မှ ပေါ်လာသောကျမ်းဖြစ်ပေသည်။ ချဲ့ဦးအံ့—“တေ ဥသောပိ ဒေဝေသု စ မနုဿေသု စ သသရန္တော ဧကံ ဗုဒ္ဓန္တရံ ခေပေသံ၊ အထ အမှာကံ ဘဂဝတာပိ ‘[...] ပဉ္စဝဿသတေ [...]’ ဟူသော မိလိန္ဒပဉ္စ (၃)လာ စကားအရ အရှင်နာဂသိန်နှင့် မိလိန္ဒဘုရင်တို့သည် မြတ်စွာဘုရားပရိနိဗ္ဗာန်ပြုပြီးနောက် အနှစ် ၅၀၀-ကျော်မှ ပေါ်ခဲ့ကြသော ပုဂ္ဂိုလ်ထူးဖြစ်ကြ၏ (Ñānuttara 1964, 26)

[...] difficult irregularities on the surface [of] Buddhism” that result when ordinary worldlings encounter the profundity of the Buddha’s teachings. However, the Nanuttara does not acknowledge the ambiguity raised above, namely, that in the *Samantapāsādikā* (Sp IV 742²⁷⁻²⁹), “only those passages adduced by Nāgasena to instruct Milinda are [considered] canonical, the rest is ‘his opinion’” (von Hinüber 2000, 86). To acknowledge as much would discount the Nanuttara’s whole argument, since these words from the *Samantapāsādikā* are traditionally put in the mouth of Buddhaghosa himself.

The final element in the argument for the inclusion of the Mil imbedded in the excerpt above brings one back to the issue of the historical development of the Tipiṭaka. The Mil, which the Nanuttara considers to be after the Fourth Council, represents the end of “the era of Pali literature.” No other “texts fit to be acknowledged as Pali [...] emerge[d]” thereafter according to him, which marks the Mil as a threshold for what does and does not belong in the Tipiṭaka. In this sense, this text is on the very periphery of the exclusive canon, and border guard for what does and does not belong. The same idea is expressed in the biography of Adiccavamsa, an influential scholar monk and reformer in the first half of the twentieth century in Burma, where it is said that “in the history of the *buddha-sāsana*, the great Pali brick wall was secured with the *Milindapañha*”⁶⁰ (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 54). While the argument is slightly circular and not accurate as far as we understand the timeline of Pali texts, it is expedient for those presiding over the Sixth Council to define the historical boundaries of the Tipiṭaka with the Mil, especially since this is the last text to be added to the Suttantapiṭaka. Perhaps more importantly, this argument

⁶⁰ ဗုဒ္ဓသာသနာ့သမိုင်းတွင် မိလိန္ဒပဉ္စကျမ်းဖြင့် ပါဠိတော်အုတ်တံတိုင်ကြီးကို ခတ်ထားခဲ့သည်ဟုလည်း... (Mrañ. chve (မြင့်ဆွေ) [1965] 2017, 54)

can be utilized when denying the scriptural authority of any other texts that come later. Thus, the Nanuttara writes that

according to [these reasons], because the *Milindapañha*, *Peṭakopadesa*, and the *Netti*[*ppakarāṇa*] were added to the other 15 texts rightfully indicated in the *aṭṭhakathās* as the number of Pali [scriptures] in the *Khuddakanikāya*, [the total number] came to be 18 texts. Because even these 18 texts were recognised as Pali [scripture] in the *Khuddakanikāya* of the Suttantapiṭaka, [they] were included in the council and accepted into the *sāsana* in the Fifth Council and Sixth Council.⁶¹ (Ñānuttara 1964, 27)

With this final comment on the matter, the Nanuttara is implying that the sanction afforded to the Mil in the Fifth and Sixth Councils was the result not of the actions of these events themselves but was merely the recognition and validation of a pre-existing state of affairs in Burma. The impression is that the councils' mandate was not to establish novel sets of texts or interfere in tradition but to merely provide a stamp of approval and protect the conventions already followed by the monastic community. In this sense, the arguments adduced by the Nanuttara and those participating in the Sixth Council were reversed engineered, that is, aimed to show why the Mil was already included in the *Khuddakanikāya* by previous generations of Burmese Buddhists before the councils themselves were convened.

In this last comment, the Nanuttara is also making it clear that according to him and those participating in the Sixth Council, the Mil was added to the *Khuddakanikāya* more than 80 years earlier, in the Fifth Council of King Mindon. Hence a final, more circular reason for including the Mil (along with the Pet) in the Sixth Council was simply because the Fifth Council's

⁶¹ ဤသို့လျှင် ခုဒ္ဒကနိကာယ်ဝင် ပါဠိတော်အရေအတွက်မှာ အဋ္ဌကထာ၌ ပြအပ်သည့် ၁၅-ကျမ်း အပြင် နေတ္တိ၊ ဝေဠုကောပဒေသ၊ မိလိန္ဒပဉ္စာတို့ကိုပါ ပေါင်းထည့်၍ ၁၈-ကျမ်း ဖြစ်လာလေတော့ သည်။ ယင်း ၁၈-ကျမ်းကိုပင် သုတ္တန္တပိဋက ခုဒ္ဒကနိကာယ်ဝင် ပါဠိတော်အဖြစ်ဖြင့် သတ်မှတ်၍ ပဉ္စမသင်္ဂါယနာ၊ ဆဋ္ဌသင်္ဂါယနာတို့၌ သာသနာ့ဝန်ဆောင် သင်္ဂါယနာတင်တော်မူ ခဲ့ကြလေသည် (1964, 27).

“Kuthodaw marble inscriptions of [the] *piṭaka* version w[ere] taken as the authority for the *Chaṭṭha saṅgāyanā* [Sixth Council]” (Myint Myint Oo 2011a, 106). This reasoning is circular because, according to Nyein Chan Maung, it was “only after [the holding] of the Sixth Saṅgāyanā of Prime Minister U Nu in 1956, [that] king Mindon’s Fifth Saṅgāyanā became popular inside and outside the country” (Nyein Chan Maung 2006, 14). Since the Fifth Council marble stelae formed the basis for the work of the Sixth Council, questioning the inclusion of any single text would cast doubt on the legitimacy of the Fifth Council edition as a whole, and thus almost a century of Pali scholasticism in Burma. Thus, simply because the Mil and the Peṭ were included “in the inscriptions of marble stone slabs of [the] Pañcama Saṅgāyanā by King Mindon[,] they were proposed to be recited in [the] Pañcama Sannipāta [fifth session] of [the] Chattha Saṅgāyanā in spite of being out of [the] Pitaka texts [proper]” (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 202). Though the Sri Lankan monk presiding over the fifth session nominally recognised the Fifth Council in his Presidential Speech when he said, after offering an account of the previous four councils in India and Sri Lanka, that “during the reign of King Mindon in Burma, the venerable Mahātheras of that period convened the Fifth Buddhist Council. So, the present Sangāyanā becomes the Sixth of its kind” (*Chaṭṭha Sangāyana Souvenir Album* 1956, 222), it seems that the need to rely on King Mindon’s stelae would have carried little weight with the Sri Lankan and Thai delegations, especially the latter, as several councils in Thailand since 1476 could easily have acted as an alternative template.

In fact, not all Burmese monks accepted the Fifth Council edition either, as demonstrated by the story of the controversial scholar Shin Ukkatṭha (ရှင် ဥက္ကဋ္ဌ ရှင် ဥက္ကဋ္ဌာ, 1897-1978; hereafter Ukkattha), who had studied in India and learned text-critical methods to approach the editing of the Tipiṭaka (Janaka Ashin 2016, 18). According to Janaka Ashin,

Ukkatṭha was invited to participate and was appointed as a president of the *pāḷivisodhaka* section, the section for editing the Pali canon. However, when he removed some Pali sentences which he deemed to be Brahmanistic interpolations, the executive monks disagreed with him, insisting on sticking to the marble stone inscriptions of the Fifth Council preserved in Mandalay. In response, he ended his participation in the Sixth Council. (2016, 145–46)

This episode shows the strong allegiance those presiding over the Sixth Council had towards the proceedings in Mandalay eight decades earlier, but also their unwillingness to adopt non-traditional methodologies when approaching their task. In contrast, Ukkatṭha “had anticipated a critical edition that not only considered minor alternatives as found in the different manuscripts and editions used, but assessed whether entire textual passages and even texts should be accepted as canonical” (Janaka Ashin 2016, 234). Though one cannot be certain, it is likely that if Ukkatṭha had remained president of the editing process, he would have removed those passages from the Mil that Buddhaghosa in the *Samantapāsādikā* identified as Nāgasena’s “opinion.” In so doing, Ukkatṭha would have been following the tradition of the First Council outlined in a passage from the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, where it is stated that while the conveners of the First Council “never advocated for the omission of any particle from their *Dhamma* preaching[,] some phrases in the utterances of disciples and gods were omitted without any hesitation” (*na hi tathagata ekavyañjanampi niratthakaṃ vadanti/ sāvakaṇaṃ vā pana devatānaṃ vā bhāsita apanetabbaṃ hoti*) (Sv I 12¹⁵⁻¹⁷) (Gamage 2009, 609). In this sense, the conveners of the Sixth Council were even more conservative than their predecessors almost two and a half millennia prior. Indeed, if Ukkatṭha had remained president of the *pāḷivisodhaka* section, it is possible the Mil would not have been included in the proceedings at all.

Conclusion

This review of the Mil's role in the standardisation of the Pali canon shows that despite its long history, classical commentators, monastic readers, and modern scholars were never clear about its place in Pali literature—unsure of whether it was a *sutta*, an *aṭṭhakathā*, or somewhere in between. Such uncertainty reasserted itself in the editing process of the Fifth and Sixth Councils in Burma, as the project of creating a stable, exclusive canon struggled when confronted by the reality of a localised and dynamic set of texts epitomised by the Mil. In this confrontation the status of the Mil had to be constantly renegotiated by both appealing to its traces in Pali literature and by creatively reinterpreting its absences. There was indeed a disconnect between the undeniable presence of the Mil in the living textual corpuses of Burma, even at the royal court of King Mindon, and the fact that it was not mentioned in the list of scriptural texts in the classical commentaries which legitimatises this same set of corpuses. Though it is not known exactly why the editors included this text in the Fifth Council stone slabs established by King Mindon, these proceedings created a precedence that the later editors of the Sixth Council decided to uphold. To this end, they resorted to the role of the Mil in the commentaries ascribed to Buddhaghosa, even though its status there is itself equivocal. When it came time to recite the Mil in the final session of the Sixth Council, its admission led to a challenge by the Sri Lanka and Thai delegations, almost upending the Sixth Council project as a whole. Hence the strategies deployed to negotiate the status of the Mil are partly textual in nature—but also rely on the sometimes-arbitrary authority of those trying to fix the boundaries of a nebulous Tipiṭaka.

The Mingun Jetavana and his commentary were yet another chapter in this process of negotiation in Burma. He came of age in the wake of the Fifth Council and was alive during the planning process and first few sessions of the Sixth Council from which he was excluded (or in

which he chose not to participate). In his commentary, the Mingun Jetavana also takes pains to establish the “canonicity” of the Mil, tracing it to both the Fourth Council and invoking the authorship of Buddhaghosa. He was no doubt aware of the ambiguous status of the root text he was commenting upon, both in terms of its place on the periphery of canonical literature but also in terms of its sometimes-awkward fit in the orthodoxy he inherited. Yet as I will argue throughout this dissertation, the Mingun Jetavana seems ready to leverage the Mil’s relatively recent inclusion in the exclusive canon to insert his own views into Theravada orthodoxy; or rather, the Mingun Jetavana is prepared to reinterpret the neoconservative conventions of mid-twentieth-century Burmese Theravada to fit the text on which he was commenting. As Gary Tubb and Emery Boose explain, “the motives for writing in the form of a commentary go beyond the aim of providing exegesis, and include the desire to associate oneself with an established authority—to present one’s views as a worthy of unfolding of time-honored tradition” (Tubb and Boose 2007, 2–3). In other words, by composing an *aṭṭhakathā* on the Mil, the Mingun Jetavana associates his views with the *Khuddakanikāya*, Suttapiṭaka, and by extension, the Tipiṭaka as a whole.

One of the threads of this dissertation will be to demonstrate the Mingun Jetavana’s efforts in this regard reveal how the exclusive canon ratified at the Fifth and Sixth Councils is largely a fiction—a powerful, efficacious fiction but one that is meant to serve socio-political goals for both state and monastic hierarchies. For the Mil has defined the limits of what counts as the “Pali canon” in Burma since the end of the nineteenth century. It exists on the very border between what is inside and what is outside the “Pali brick wall,” to quote Adiccavamsa’s biography. Yet rather than reinforcing the closed borders of this canon, its inclusion has left the whole project open to further innovations, for if the Mil is taken as authoritative, then it follows

that its *aṭṭhakathā* has legitimate claims to the same authority, legitimising itself and the views of its author while destabilising the socio-political process of creating a closed canon. Speaking about the same phenomenon in Sanskrit philosophical exegesis, Karin Preisendanz explains that by writing in the form of commentary, one “could at the same time use the authority of the basic text as a vehicle for the establishment of their own ideas or even their own innovative tradition” (Preisendanz 2008, 608). Hence by giving the Mil the status as the last text in the Suttapiṭaka, the Fifth and Sixth Councils have provided an opening for someone like the Mingun Jetavana to enter his ideas into the Tipiṭaka itself. It is to these ideas and the unique nature of the Mingun Jetavana’s commentary that our discussion now turns.

2 The Pali Commentarial Project in the Second Millennium: The *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*, *Milinda-tīkā*, and *Milinda-nissaya*

Introduction

Despite the Mil's development over more than two-millennia, the Mingun Jetavana's 1949 Mil-a is the first known *aṭṭhakathā* commentary—the most authoritative form of textual exegesis in Pali literature—on this enigmatic root text.⁶² The uncertainty around the status and place of the Mil in the Tipiṭaka described in the last chapter partly explains why it has gone so long without the exegetical infrastructure afforded other texts in Pali literature. For if the Mil was already seen as a kind of commentary, or somewhere between the commentary and Abhidhammapiṭaka, it would not have warranted an *aṭṭhakathā* like other texts in the Suttapiṭaka. Whatever the reasons, this lack of an *aṭṭhakathā* to the Mil is what allowed the Mingun Jetavana to make his own intervention with this root text in the mid-twentieth century. Yet such a lacuna also came as a surprise, for in the *Nidānakathā* (*Introductory Discourse*) of the Mil-a, it is written that

although the *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of Purification*) and other commentaries were composed by the Venerable teacher Buddhaghosa at the time of King Mahānāma in the island of Sīhaḷa [Sri Lanka], and afterwards, the remaining commentaries were authored by the teacher Dhammapāla and others, so also, one does not hear that, “there is any *aṭṭhakathā* whatsoever, narrated by these [two], on the meaning... of the *Milindapañhā*.”⁶³

⁶² Anne Blackburn refers to prominent Sri Lankan monks using a commentary to the Mil in the early eighteenth century (2001, 45), but the use of the word ‘commentary’ in her monograph refers alternatively to handbooks, bilingual glossaries (*sannas* or *sannayas*), and subcommentaries (*tīkā*s), not usually to the authoritative *aṭṭhakathā* form. As Norman points out, “the Gandhavaṃsa mentions a Milindapañhavaṇṇanā [Gv 65²⁹⁻³⁰ in the 1886 PTS Journal edition by Ivan Minayeff], but gives no author's name” (Norman 1983, 150), and the Mingun Jetavana, who was probably familiar with the contents of the Burmese-authored *Gandhavaṃsa*, does not mention a text by this name in his *aṭṭhakathā*.

⁶³ *kiñ cā pi sīhaḷadīpe mahānāmarañño kale bhadantācariyabuddhaghosena visuddimaggādi aṭṭhakathāyo ca tato aparabhāge dhammapālācariyādīhi sesaṭṭhakathāyo ca viracitā/ tathāpi... milindapañhassa ca tehi samvaṇṇitā yākāci aṭṭhakathā atthe ti na sūyate* (Mil-a 1, ²⁷⁻³¹)

The Mingun Jetavana, or whoever wrote the *Nidānakathā* (see below), begins the commentary by emphasizing that no *aṭṭhakathā* is known to exist or be extant on the Mil, despite its ubiquity in Theravāda history and prominent place in the Tipiṭaka of Burma since at least the end of the nineteenth century. The situation is stressed even further when it is stated in the *Nidānakathā* that “any text whatsoever explaining the meanings, even one composed in the Pali language about the *Milindapañha*, is just not found.”⁶⁴ With these words, the Mingun Jetavana is making it clear he was unable to resort to previous exegetical works on the Mil, as was the method of his predecessors, even texts in the vernacular, when composing his *aṭṭhakathā*. Instead, the Mingun Jetavana relies on other texts of the Tipiṭaka, their commentaries, and subcommentaries, as his source materials. Since he could not find any commentary to the Mil before 1949, the Mingun Jetavana also considered his task unprecedented in the history of Burmese Buddhist scholasticism.

Not only then is the Mingun Jetavana’s commentary the sole *aṭṭhakathā* on the Mil, but when taken together with his Peṭ-a published in 1926, it appears to be the first *aṭṭhakathā* composed in at least 500 years, if not a millennium.⁶⁵ Describing this situation in Burma, the author of the preface to the Mingun Jetavana’s *Nibbān lamḥ ññvan* (နိဗ္ဗာန်လမ်းညွှန် *Guide to Nibbāna*), a text outlining the Mingun Jetavana’s system of *vipassanā* meditation, tries to elevate the Mingun Jetavana’s status as a commentator by pointing out that “in the Pagan era, top *piṭaka*

⁶⁴ *milindapañhaṃ pati pāḷibhāsāya kato yo koci atthasaṃvaṇṇanāgantho eko pi na saṃvijjateva* (Mil-a 1,²⁵⁻²⁶)

⁶⁵ The reason for this five-century margin is because the relative dating for the commentary on the *Apadāna*, the *Visuddhajanavilāsini*, ranges from 1000 to 1500 C.E. (von Hinüber 2000, 149). The *Visuddhajanavilāsini* is unknown to all previous commentators and is probably the last instance of an *aṭṭhakathā* commentary until the early twentieth century. Even more remarkably, von Hinüber (following Bechert 1958, 20) suggests that it could have been “composed in Southeast Asia” (von Hinüber 2000, 147).

masters and experts only wrote subcommentaries on the *Dīghanikāya*. In King Thalun's period, Taung Phela Sayadaw wrote subcommentaries relating to the Vinaya” (Unknown 2018, 2).⁶⁶ However, it is emphasised that no one composed an *aṭṭhakathā* during these periods or afterwards, at least until the advent of the Mingun Jetavana. Rather than *aṭṭhakathās*, the exegetical texts composed during these periods were subcommentaries (*ṭīkās*), manuals (*dīpanīs*), or Pali-Burmese glosses (*nissayas*). These forms of exegetical literature require a great command of Pali language and literature to compose but do not have the same authority as an *aṭṭhakathā* in the Theravada hierarchy of exegesis. In this sense, the Mingun Jetavana not only wrote the first *aṭṭhakathā* on the Mil but reactivated the *aṭṭhakathā* form for a brief moment in the middle of the twentieth century.

To thus appreciate the historical importance of the Mil-a in Burmese and Theravada literature generally, it is necessary in the first section to introduce the Mil-a and provide in the second section an outline of its chapters. In this outline, the Mingun Jetavana’s composition is compared to other editions of the Mil to emphasize the unique qualities of his twentieth-century commentary and how the author amplified and redirected the root text to present his own interpretative commitments. In particular, the Mingun Jetavana consistently steers his commentary to issues of *vipassanā* meditation, monastic doctrine, and the relationship between the two—even when such topics are only implicit or altogether absent in the root text. In the third eponymous section I present an overview of the *Milinda-ṭīkā*, composed in Thailand during

⁶⁶ The Pagan Era (ပုဂံခေတ် *Pu gaṃ khet*) lasted from circa 950-1300 (Lieberman 2003, xiii), while the reign of King Thalun (သာလှစံမင်း *Sā Ivan maṅḥ*) in the Toungoo Dynasty (တောင်ငူမင်းဆက် *Toṅ nū maṅḥ chak*) was from 1629-1648 (Than Tun 1968, 173).

the fifteenth century, the author of which also did not have previous commentaries on the Mil to consult. This lack of exegetical precedence and the nature of the *ṭikā* form allowed this author, like the Mingun Jetavan, a degree of freedom to channel his reading of the root text to issues of grammar and *jātaka* tales, much to the consternation of its modern editor. The point of this section on the *Milinda-ṭikā* is to suggest that the Mil-a has a comparable degree of freedom and fluidity as such subcommentaries, and that the author of the *Milinda-ṭikā* and the Mingun Jetavana operate at times with a different understanding of the purpose of commentary from the paradigm of modern scholars. I reinforce this argument in my discussion of an early twentieth-century *Milinda-nissaya* mentioned by the Mingun Jetavana. Bilingual bitexts⁶⁷ that have dominated the literary culture of second-millennium Burmese Buddhism, a *nissaya* is an interphrasal or interlinear bilingual gloss of Pali into Burmese, where a single or a set of Pali words from the root text is given, then explained with Burmese equivalents in a type of running translation-cum-commentary.⁶⁸ The result is a seamless text where the reader pivots from the target text, such as Burmese, to understand the source text, usually in Pali, and vice versa.

Nissayas enable even further latitude in how one presents a root text being commented on to a

⁶⁷ Coming from translation theory, the concept of “bitext” was first introduced by Brian Harris (1988), who under this concept in terms of psycholinguistics but with an application in translation technology (Melby, Lommel, and Morado Vázquez 2014, 409). Harris describes a bitext as when a source text and a target text are “sewn firmly together like a piece of cloth and its lining is to be used as one fabric” (Harris 1988, 8). In this sense, for him and the scholars who followed him, a bitext is “not two texts but a single text in two dimensions, each of which is a language” (Harris 1988, 8). Since the introduction of this concept in translation theory, it has become an operative idea in translation technology, involving the alignment of parallel corpuses of texts across multiple target languages (see e.g. Tiedemann 2011), thereby lending itself to applications in language acquisition in artificial intelligence and machine learning. The alignment of source text and target text is relevant to the study of Pali and vernacular literature, as there are multiple techniques to visually “sew” these two together on manuscripts in Southeast Asia, but perhaps more important is the psycholinguistic component, the ways that readers in what is now Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka are able to read Pali-vernacular texts as one, and how this bivalent reading has affected the historical development of Buddhist literature in Theravada regions.

⁶⁸ For an overview of research on the *nissaya* in Burma, see Tin Lwin (1961), John Okell (1965), William Pruitt (1994), and Trent Walker (2018; 2020; 2022), who looks at the bitexts of Southeast Asia in a comparative perspective.

specialised audience, often functioning as aids in the study of Pali lexicography, grammar, or verse. By presenting examples from the Mil-a that read like a *nissaya*, I argue that the exegetical methodology of the Mingun Jetavana shows traces of influence from these bilingual texts, not surprising given the literary culture in which he was trained. Hence while the Mingun Jetavana may have reactivated the *aṭṭhakathā* form of commentary in the twentieth century, he also adapted it based on the exegetical developments in the millennium since the last such commentaries were composed.

2.1 Introducing the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*

In an article on the front page of the December 9th- 1948 edition of the *Mran mā. alaṅḥ* (မြန်မာ့အလင်း: *Light of Myanmar*, hereafter *Light of Burma*),⁶⁹ a leading daily in Burma established in 1914, there is a photograph of several monks arriving at the Yangon airport from Mawlamyine, Mon State (Fig. 3). The article declares that the “Thaton Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw, at 80 years of age, composed the Mil-a, [and that these monks] were seen when

⁶⁹ In using “Burma” instead of “Myanmar” for the English title, I am following the newspaper’s own convention, which gives “*Light of Burma*” as its English title on top of the first page.

arriving from Mawlamyine by airplane, bringing [the MS with them]”⁷⁰ (1948, 1). The Mingun Jetavana actually began composing this text in 1938 “when he was exactly 70 years old” (Bio trans. Hla Myint 2019, 84). While it took him only three years to complete, the Mingun Jetavana waited until after the chaos of the Second World War to publish, when in December of 1948 his disciples retrieved the MS from him and distributed the text “all over Burma by [the] Pariyatti Sāsana Nuggaha Organization” in Yangon (Bio trans. Hla Myint 2019, 84). The first Burmese edition in 1949 is 515 pages, with the commentary proper covering 505 pages.

According to U Hoke Sein (ဦးဟုတ်စိန် Ṫḥ Hut cin), the compiler of the *Amyāḥ sumḥ mran mā-aṅga lip-pāli abhidhān* (အများသုံး မြန်မာ-အင်္ဂလိပ်-ပါဠိ အဘိဓာန် *The Universal Burmese-English-Pali Dictionary*) (1978), the first (and until recently only) Burmese edition known consisted of 2000 copies (Bollée 1969, 315). While the Mingun Jetavana was esteemed throughout Burma as a leading monk in the teaching of *vipassanā* meditation, evidenced by the



Figure 3: Photograph in the *Mran mā. alaṅḥ* of the Mingun Toya Sayadaw (မင်းကွန်းတောရဆရာတော် Maṅḥ kvanḥ to ra Cha rā tau), U Tiloka Nana (ဦးတီလောကညာဏ Ṫḥ Tīloka ṅāṅa), and an unidentified third individual carrying the MS of the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*.

⁷⁰ မိလိန္ဒပဉ္စကထာအဋ္ဌကထာ [...] ၈၀-ရှိ သထုံ မင်းကွန်းဇေတဝန် ဆရာတော်ကြီးက ရေးသား၍ [...] မော်လမြိုင်မှ လေယာဉ်ပျံနှင့် ပုင်ဆောင် ရောက် ရှိ လာ စဉ်တွေ့မြင်ရပုံ (မြန်မာ့အလင်း *(Mran mā. alaṅḥ)* [Light of Myanmar] 1948, 1).

fact that his disciples travelled by plane to retrieve his MS, within a year the newspapers started to feature stories of different monastic and lay organisations opposed to this text, and after apparently 1600 copies were confiscated by the government (Bollée 1969, 315) in December 1949, the Mil-a effectively went underground in Burma for the next 75 years.

Copies still existed, however, for in 1953 during a visit to Mandalay, Indian scholar P.V. Bapat was given a copy of the Mil-a by “Mr. U Ba Thaw, Retired Sessions Judge,” who seems to have also intimated that this text “was at that time banned by the Burmese Government” (Deshpande 1999, 2). Whether this ban was *de jure* or *de facto* will be explored later, but years later, in 1968, Bapat “handed over” a copy of the text to his then student, Madhav Deshpande (Deshpande 1999, 1), who in 1984 published the first article dedicated to the Mil-a in English with excerpts in Devanāgarī.⁷¹ Eventually Deshpande published a full edition of the Mil-a transliterated into Latin script in 1999, furnishing this edition with background information on the author in the introduction, including a Burmese-language newspaper article that Bapat had provided him detailing some of the controversy caused by the original publication. The work of Deshpande was the first full edition of the Mil-a outside of Burma, introducing the text to a new generation of scholars. In response to Deshpande’s publication, which was printed by the International Institute for Buddhist Studies of the International College for Advanced Buddhist Studies in Tokyo, Pali scholar Kōgen Mizuno published in the year 2000 a 29-page article in Japanese that summarised Deshpande’s introduction, but offered a more detailed outline of the Mil-a’s contents, further comparing the text of the Mingun Jetavana with Vilhelm Trenckner’s

⁷¹ Deshpande, Madhav. “Introducing the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* of Thaton Mingun Zetawun Sayadaw.” *Amṛtadhārā, Professor R.N. Dandekar Felicitation Volume*. Edited by S.D. Joshi. Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1984: 95-103.

1880 edition and a Thai edition translated into Japanese.⁷² The 1999 introduction of Deshpande (which builds off many of his comments from 1984) and the article by Mizuno from 2000 remain the only two major treatments on the Mil-a to date.

Yet decades earlier, in 1968, Willem B. Bollée mentioned the Mil-a in a single sentence in a discussion of stelae of Pali texts found in Burma (Bollée 1968, 495), providing it with a more thorough treatment of just over three pages in a book review of Bode's *The Pali Literature of Burma* in 1969, most of which consists of untranslated excerpts from the original (Bollée 1969, 315–18). The excerpts that Bollée provides are from the two main controversies of the text, namely, the Mingun Jetavana's critique of the current practice of the *kaṭhina-kamma*, or robe-giving ceremony during the rains retreat, and his promotion of *bhikkhuṇī-upasampadā*, the higher-ordination of women as nuns in Burma, where they are currently only considered as quasi-monastic religious renunciants, or *thilashins* (သီလရှင် *sīla rhañ*). While these works were appearing outside of Burma, the text was not completely forgotten within the country.

Deshpande also mentions that his erstwhile student, Patrick Pranke, was able to obtain a copy of the Mil-a while in Burma, presumably during the late 1990s, and in 2017, a new edition was printed by devotees in the lineage of the Mingun Jetavana, led by Pali scholar U Aung Mon (ဦးအောင်မွန် *Ūḥ Aon mvan*). This edition is a reprint of the original 1949 edition with a brief forward by U Aung Mon, but its presence reflects the fact that the Bhamo Sayadaw (ဗန်းမော်ဆရာတော် *Banḥ mau Cha rā tau*), the head of the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee (နိုင်ငံတော်သံဃာ့မဟာနာယကအဖွဲ့ *nuiñ ñaṃ tau saṃghā. mahānāyaka aphvai.*), the

⁷² Skilling notes that this Japanese translation was completed by Saishun Kanamori in 1939-40 and published in the *Nanden dai zōkyō*, volume 59 (2010, 17).

leading monastic organisation in Burma, is said to have recently lifted the *de facto* sanction against the Mil-a, declaring that its printing and study should no longer be censored or shunned.

The exact edition of the Mil that the Mingun Jetavana was using for his commentary is unknown, in part because this commentary predates the Sixth Council edition of the Tipiṭaka produced in Yangon in 1954-56. The Mingun Jetavana's commentary was most probably based on the Fifth Council edition of the Tipiṭaka or a text derived therefrom, for “[t]hirty years after the work of inscribing *piṭaka* on marble slabs, the three *piṭaka* was published for the first time” by the Hanthawaddy (ဟံသာဝတီ *Haṃsāvātī*) Press, then owned by Philip H. Ripley (Myint Myint Oo 2011a, 104). The production of this first printed version of the Tipiṭaka in Burma “began around 1900” (Myint Myint Oo 2011a, 105), followed by many other versions printed by competing publishing houses. As Skilling (2010, 15) points out, two later editions of the Mil appear in L.D. Barnett's *A supplementary catalogue of Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit books in the library of the British Museum acquired during the years 1906-1928*. The first is edited by one “Hsaya Hbe” published in 1915 in Yangon, with the second coming a year later in 1916, edited by a “Ū Hpye,” also in Yangon (Barnett 1928, 634). It is possible that the Mingun Jetavana made use of some or all of these texts, though considering his considerable monastic training in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when palm-leaf MSS were the main medium in which monastics interacted with texts of the Tipiṭaka, it is not unlikely that he had palm-leaf MSS at his disposal, possibly predating the Fifth Council. It is also not impossible that the Mingun Jetavana was working either partially or completely from memory, that he had memorised the Mil from multiple texts or recitations and “consulted” this mental version over any single printed edition or manuscript. When other editions of the Mil are compared to the root text as outlined in the Mil-a, Deshpande suggests that “the basic Pali text of the *Milindapañha* seems to remain the

same in different editions” (Deshpande 1999, 21). While this semblance may be superficially true, the following comparison of different editions of the Mil demonstrate that even if the Mingun Jetavana was working with a similar text, he partially reconstructed or even reimagined the Mil through his commentary.

2.2 Outline of the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*

Along with Deshpande (1999), Mizuno (2000) compares the outline of the root text found in the Mil-a with Wilhelm Trenckner’s 1880 edition in Latin script, but also contrasts these two with a Thai edition translated into Japanese in 1939-40. Hence altogether there are five texts being compared in what follows: the 1880 edition of the Mil by Trenckner, the 1939-40 Japanese translation of a Thai edition, the original 1949 Burmese edition of the Mil-a, the 1960 Sixth Council edition of the Mil (probably equivalent to the 1982 Burmese edition mentioned by Deshpande), and the 1999 edition of the Mil-a edited by Deshpande. Starting with the beginning of the text, Mizuno points out that the *Nidānakathā* and *Ganthārambhakathā* are unique to the Mil-a and found in neither Trenckner’s nor the Thai version translated into Japanese (Mizuno 2000, 12). Nor are they present in the 1960 Sixth Council edition. Their absence is unsurprising, since these divisions explicitly address the commentary, not the root text. In his 1999 edition, Deshpande puts these two divisions after the table of contents on pages one to six, while in the original 1949 Burmese edition, which was not available to Mizuno, the *Nidānakathā* and the latter two divisions are separated by the table of contents, falling on pages ka and kha and one to six, respectively.

This disarticulated layout in the 1949 Burmese edition raises the issue of whether the *Nidānakathā* was written by the Mingun Jetavana himself or someone editing his book. While Deshpande seems not to entertain this possibility, Mizuno asserts that the *Nidānakathā* was not written by the Mingun Jetavana but fails to offer any reasons for his claim (Mizuno 2000, 11). My guess is that Mizuno took the laudatory references to the ‘Mahāthera Mingun Jetavana’ in the *Nidānakathā* as evidence that it was written by someone else, but it is not impossible that the Mingun Jetavana referred to himself in the third person in such terms. Mizuno might also have assumed that the Mingun Jetavana was following tradition, since some *nidānas* in the classical *aṭṭhakathās* are thought to be written by someone other than the author of the commentary, but again, this fact is not grounds to be certain that the Mingun Jetavana did not write his own *Nidānakathā*. Mizuno may very well be correct, however, since the handwritten MS of the Mil-a in my possession does not contain the *Nidānakathā* but starts instead with the salutations to the Buddha (P. *namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*) that begins the *Ganthārambhakathā*. With this observation and the fact that the 1949 Burmese edition of the Mil-a separates the *Nidānakathā* from the main text by the table of contents, I am inclined to think that Mizuno is correct—the Mingun Jetavana did not write his own *Nidānakathā*. On the final page of the Mil-a (431, ¹²⁻¹⁶), however, there is what is called the *nigamanam* (“conclusion”), providing bibliographical information about the Mingun Jetavana, his birthplace, and the site where he composed this text. Mizuno also claims that this *nigamanam* is not written by the Mingun Jetavana himself (Mizuno 2000, 11), but on this account he may be wrong, as the handwritten MS in my possession, unavailable to Mizuno, does include these six sentences in the same handwriting as the rest of the text. This *nigamanam* immediately follows 10 lines of verse

(Mil-a 431,¹⁻¹⁰) that also appear to be the Mingun Jetavana's own composition, especially since it is found in the same MS and not included anywhere in the root text.

After the *Nidānakathā* and the *Ganthārambhakathā*, the first major division of the Mil-a is called the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa* (*Chapter on Previous Connections*) (Mil-a 7-72), which shares much of the content with what is known in Trenckner's edition as the *Bāhirakathā* (*Framing Discourse*) (Mil 1-25). Though the content is roughly the same, covering the past lives of the two protagonists and the events leading up to the meeting of Nāgasena and Milinda, it is not clear if the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa* that the Mingun Jetavana is working from and the *Bāhirakathā* of Trenckner's edition can really be said to match. For many of the verses that Trenckner includes in his *Bāhirakathā* are spread out in the *Nidānakathā*, *Ganthārambhakathā*, and the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa* of the Mingun Jetavana's commentary. One such example are the verses beginning with "this king named Milinda in Sāgalā" (P. *milindo nāma so rājā sāgalāyaṃ*) that come in the second paragraph of the *Nidānakathā* of the Mil-a (Mil-a 1,¹¹⁻¹⁶) in a truncated form, then again in the second page of the *Ganthārambhakathā* (Mil-a 4,⁷⁻¹⁶) in full but after an altogether different set of verses. In contrast, these same verses beginning with *milindo nāma so rājā sāgalāyaṃ* are found to open the *Bāhirakathā* of Trenckner's edition (Mil 1,¹⁻¹⁰), the 1960 Sixth Council edition, and the oldest Mil MSS presented by von Hinüber (preceded by *namo tassa tthu*) (von Hinüber 1987, 112), indicating that they are the opening features of some of the oldest recensions of the root text.

It is telling, then, that the Mingun Jetavana did not start his own text with these verses, but rather fits them into his own scheme and does not present them in full until six pages into his commentary. Also, as Mizuno notes (2000, 11), two verses at the end of the *Bāhirakathā* of Trenckner's edition (Mil 22,¹⁵⁻¹⁶ and Mil 24,¹⁵⁻¹⁶) beginning with *caranto gāmanigamaṃ* and

nisasayaṃ parājayo respectively, are mentioned in the *Ganthārambhakathā* of the Mingun Jetavana (Mil-a 4,²³⁻²⁴ and Mil-a 5,¹⁻²). The Mingun Jetavana reintroduces these same verses near the end of his *Pubbayogakaṇḍa* (Mil-a 69,³⁴; Mil-a 70,¹⁻²; and Mil-a 72,⁵⁻⁶) but this time in the context of their “complete” forms as found in Trenckner. Moreover, the verses that begin the *Ganthārambhakathā* of the Mil-a (3,⁴⁻¹⁹) do not appear as such in Trenckner’s edition but rather, are unique to the Mil-a. The first three words of the verses, *anupannassa maggassa uppādetā*, are taken from what Trenckner calls the *Meṇḍakopañho* (Mil 217,⁹⁻¹⁰) and are repeated again throughout that same question and in other texts in the *Khuddakanikāya* (e.g. Paṭi II 194,¹⁹); the rest of the verses, praising the Buddha and referring to his commentary, appear to be the Mingun Jetavana’s own creation, or possibly, hybrid verses combined with adaptations of material that exist elsewhere in the Mil or Tipiṭaka.

What the reordered nature of the verses in the first three divisions of the Mil-a suggests is that the Mingun Jetavana saw his commentary as a unique text unto itself, not reducible to the root or beholden to its order. This observation might be obvious enough, but the disjointed verses also leave open the possibility that the Mingun Jetavana was working from a different root text or from multiple MSS, or perhaps more likely, that he was not against manipulating the text as he saw fit, introducing material in his *aṭṭhakathā* that does not always correspond to the version in front of him. It is difficult to be sure without knowing the text the Mingun Jetavana was working from, but it is seen in the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa* that the Mingun Jetavana is not concerned with commenting on every single word, concept, or anecdote in the root text, nor is he concerned with explaining the details of Nāgasena’s and Milinda’s past lives. For this reason, the Mingun Jetavana’s commentary on the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa* is “the part that has the most difference among the three texts” that Mizuno compares (Mizuno 2000, 7). It is a striking section that spends most

of its time detailing the methods to achieve the various higher forms of knowledge (P. *abhiññās*) present but only briefly alluded to in the root text, a fact which is represented in the table of contents in the 1949 Burmese edition but is absent from the table of contents provided in Deshpande's 1999 edition. The Mingun Jetavana extrapolates these brief allusions to the *abhiññās* in the Mil, adding his own commentary, introducing the states of total absorption (P. *jhāna*) needed to achieve these higher forms of knowledge, and supplying copious and extensive excerpts from the *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of Purification*, hereafter Vism). In fact, this section of the text is almost more of a handbook of the Vism than a commentary on the Mil, or rather, a commentary on the latter text through the former.

At the end of the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa*, which is almost three times as long as the *Bāhirakathā* in Trenckner's edition, 50 pages longer than the Sixth Council edition, and almost 20 pages longer than the Thai version, the Mingun Jetavana reviews the *abhiññās* he has explicated, noting that now “the context story (*bāhirakathā*) is adorned, the explanation of it is complete.”⁷³ Hence as Deshpande also points out (1999, 20), while the Mingun Jetavana calls this chapter the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa*, he is aware of the name “*bāhirakathā*”. Since the Sixth Council edition of the Mil provides the division header as *Bāhirakathā* and contains a single subheading as *Pubbayogādi*, perhaps the Mingun Jetavana is following a Burmese convention here, or conversely, perhaps the Sixth Council edition is following the Mingun Jetavana. Interestingly, “the printed Siamese *Milindapañha* has opening verses and a prose *bāhirakathā* which are not found in the PTS [i.e., Trenckner's edition] or some manuscript versions, but are given in full in the Khmer translation” (Skilling 2010, 11). Eng Jin Ooi goes into further detail

⁷³ *paṭimaṇḍitā bāhirakathā. tassā vaṇṇanā niṭṭhitā* (Mil-a 72,²²)

here, explaining that the printed Thai edition edited by Chattasalla Thera in 1923 begins with a three-page section called the *paṇāmagāthā* (“verses of salutation”). This section consists of 350 Pali words and contains “five verses paying obeisance to the three jewels” and a narration of the “Buddha’s address to his monks at the time of his demise” where he predicts the debate between Milinda and Nāgasena some “five hundred years after his passing” (Eng Jin Ooi 2022, 84). According to Eng Jin Ooi, this *paṇāmagāthā* “is a later addition to the Siamese recensions, taken either from the *Saṅkhepa* version or another text” (Eng Jin Ooi 2022, 84). The section in the printed Thai edition and the additions by the Mingun Jetavana imply that it was these first few divisions of the root text that were most amenable to manipulation or addition in the various recensions of the Mil circulating throughout South and Southeast Asia.

The next three divisions found in Trenckner’s edition are called the *Lakkhaṇapañho* (*Question on Characteristics*) (Mil 25-49), the *Nāgasena-Milindarāja-pañhā* (*Questions of King Milinda and Nāgasena*) (Mil 50-64), and the *Vimaticchedana-pañho* (*Question on Severing Doubt*) (Mil 65-89). The Mingun Jetavana combines these divisions into what he calls the *Milindapañhākaṇḍa* (Mil-a 73-151), even “though [he] is aware of its subdivision into *Lakkhaṇapañha* and *Vimaticchedanapañha* (pp. 5-6)” (Deshpande 1999, 20). The Mingun Jetavana partitions this division into *vaggas* (sections) using descriptive names taken from the root text such as the *Addhānavagga* (*Section on Time*), the *Sativagga* (*Section on Mindfulness*), and the *Arūpadhammavavathānavagga* (*Section on the Analysis of Formless Dhammas*), then subdivides the *vaggas* according to the number of questions therein without further description. The 1960 Sixth Council edition also uses the same titles for the *vaggas* as does the Mingun Jetavana, calling this section simply the “*Milindapañha*,” but along with dividing the questions numerically, it offers further descriptive names for each question. In this section of the Mil-a,

unlike in the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa*, “there are rarely any comments that deviate from the original,” but Mizuno (2000, 13) notes that a long excerpt from the Vinaya-piṭaka (Vin I 342-349) is provided (at Mil-a 125-133) to explain the question asked by Milinda: “The one being reborn, does that one know: ‘I will be reborn?’” (*yo uppajjati jānati so uppajjissāmīti*) (Mil 73,¹⁻²). This excerpt interpolated by the Mingun Jetavana, which is also found in the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* (Dhp-a I 56), details the story of King Brahmādatta, his feud with a neighboring monarch, and his restoration of the kingdom to the son of his slain foe, Dīghāvu. Since the teaching is offered in the Vinaya-piṭaka in the context of disputing monks and is meant to serve as an example of forbearance and non-resentment, it is not clear how it connects with the question asked to Nāgasena in the Mil, but it must have been relevant in the mind of the Mingun Jetavana, indicating his willingness to deviate from the content of the root text as he saw fit and his propensity to use the Vinaya for such interpolations.

Following the *Milindapañhākaṇḍa*, the Mingun Jetavana has a brief chapter called the *Lakkhaṇapañhākaṇḍa* (*Chapter on the Questions about Characteristics*) (Mil-a 152-157). Deshpande notes that this chapter in the Mil-a is “the first part of Trenckner’s *Meṇḍakapañho*” (Deshpande 1999, 20). Mizuno calls the *Lakkhaṇapañhākaṇḍa* here a “preparation for the next section,” (Mizuno 2000, 7), which seems likely given its brevity and the fact that the Sixth Council edition has a similar, very brief chapter titled *Meṇḍakapañhārambhakathā* (*Discourse on the Preparation for the Questions about the Ram*). In demarcating this chapter with a separate name from the *Meṇḍakapañhākaṇḍa*, the Mingun Jetavana seems to be following the text itself, since the name *Lakkhaṇapañham* is found in its initial pages as one of the “six ways [the text] is divided” (*chaddhā vibhajitvā*) (Mil 2,¹⁷ and B^e 2,¹³). The same name is used as a sub-header earlier in Trenckner’s edition but not as a separate chapter, while the *Lakkhaṇapañhākaṇḍa* is

missing in the Thai version as well (Mizuno 2000, 7). It is not that these same questions are absent from the other texts, just that they “are clearly demarcated only in” the Mil-a (Mizuno 2000, 7).

Next in the Mil-a is the *Meṇḍakapañhākaṇḍa* (*Chapter on the Questions of the Ram*) (Mil-a 158-293), which refers to the dilemmatic questions that are characteristic of the root text. This chapter title is shared by all the texts under review, but its subdivisions are quite disparate: while the Mil-a divides the sections with the same headers as the Sixth Council edition, the Mingun Jetavana further divides the questions numerically rather than with descriptive titles. In this respect, the Sixth Council and Trenckner’s edition share more in common, using many of the same descriptors. Mizuno points out that this chapter in the Mingun Jetavana’s commentary “has many issues related to the Vinaya not found in” either Trenckner’s nor the Thai edition Mizuno is working from, “but it also discusses [meditation] practice and the enlightenment attained related to the Vinaya and the *jhānas*” (Mizuno 2000, 25). Characteristic of this connection between *vinaya* and meditation in the Mil-a is the question of whether “cognisant lying is a *pārājika*” (*sampajānamusāvāde pārājiko*) (Mil 192,¹⁶) or whether “cognisant lying is a light offence” (*sampajānamusāvāde lahukaṃ āpattiṃ*) (Mil 192,¹⁷), that is, whether the act of lying while being aware of the fact one is lying is an offence requiring defeat and disrobement, or mere confession. Picking up on the matter in the root text, the Mingun Jetavana connects this discussion about cognisant lying to lying about the attainment of the four states of total absorption, writing that “saying ‘I have entered into the first state of total absorption’ is an offence of *pārājika* of speaking a falsehood knowingly, thus in this case one falls into a

pārājika.”⁷⁴ The issue of lying about attaining the *jhānas* falls under the purview of the fourth *pārājika* (Vin I 91,¹⁸⁻²⁵) but this connection with the fourth *pārājika* is not explicitly made in the Mil, which explains the contradictory statements made by the Buddha here in a rather perfunctory manner. His connection of cognisant lying with the attainment of the *jhānas* reminds one of the Mingun Jetavana’s extended focus on such states in the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa*, indicating a larger theme in his Mil-a that is seen consistently throughout the text.

Given the concern of the *Meṇḍakapañhākaṇḍa* with the Vinaya, it is not surprising that in this chapter the two controversial discussions about monastic discipline are found, namely, those passages related to the *kaṭhina-kamma* (“robe-giving ceremony”) (Mil-a 172-175 and Mil-a 235-245) and the *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* (“the higher-ordination of nuns”) (Mil-a 194-203). It is noteworthy that the passages concerning the *kaṭhina-kamma* appear in two places and are prompted by two distinct dilemmas in the root text. While the passages on promoting the *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* are relatively focused and stem from a single dilemma in the root text, the Mingun Jetavana brings up several seemingly unrelated issues regarding the *kaṭhina-kamma*, hence it is probably better to understand this issue as containing several contentious and overlapping points. Indeed, a newspaper article dated November 8th 1949 that Bapat received from Burma in a leading daily, the Hanthawaddy (ဝံသဝဝဝံဝံ *Haṃsāvātī*), instructs its readers to “remove from that book (these points) on pages 195, 200, 228, 281, 203, 276, and 77” (Deshpande 1999, 10).⁷⁵ All these pages, except for the last, are found within the

⁷⁴ *paṭhamaṃ jhānaṃ samāpajjīṃ ti sampajānamusā bhaṇantassa āpatti pārājikassā ti ettha pārājike pavattati* (Mil-a 228,¹⁷⁻¹⁸)

⁷⁵ The numbers referred to in the newspaper article are to the original 1949 edition, and roughly correspond to pages 167-168, 171-172, 194-195, 239-240, 174, 234-235, and 66, respectively, in Deshpande’s 1999 edition.

Meṇḍakapañhākaṇḍa, and all relate to the two controversial issues above, with pages 167-168 part of the lead up to the question introducing the first discussion on the *kaṭhina-kamma*. As Mizuno writes, these controversial passages, especially since they relate to the Vinaya, can be said to be “characteristic” of the *Meṇḍakapañhākaṇḍa* as found in the Mingun Jetavana’s commentary (Mizuno 2000, 25).

After the *Meṇḍakapañhākaṇḍa*, there is a brief chapter the Mingun Jetavana calls the *Anumānapañhākaṇḍā* (*Chapter on the Questions on Inference*) (Mil-a 294-313). As Deshpande notes, this chapter consists of only one section in the Mil-a named the *Navamavagga* (*Ninth Section*), “indicating continuity with the final *Vagga* of the *Meṇḍakapañhākaṇḍa*, which is titled *Aṭṭhamavagga*” (*Eighth Section*) (Deshpande 1999, 21). This chapter is brief in the Mil-a at 19 pages and in Trenckner’s edition, it is only 33 pages long, which he simply lists as *Anumānapañho* and awkwardly subsumes it under the *Meṇḍakapañho* chapter. In the Sixth Council edition there is a large division of the same name that covers 83 pages with four section divisions, the last of which is titled *Anumānavagga* (*Inference Section*) and at 34 pages roughly corresponds to Trenckner’s *Anumānavagga*. In contrast, the Thai edition that Mizuno works with is almost 50 pages in length, which could be due to the fact that it includes eight more questions on inference (Eng Jin Ooi 2022, 89).⁷⁶ While the Mil-a deals with the *Anumānapañhākaṇḍa* only briefly, it does so in a unique way. In this chapter, the teachings of the Buddha are illustrated

⁷⁶ To answer why there is an increase in the length of this chapter in the Thai version Mizuno was consulting, we would have to ascertain to which of the three Siam recensions Eng Jin identifies this text belongs. According to Eng Jin, the Lamphun Recension is that which most closely parallels Trenckner’s edition and that of the Sixth Council, possibly because it is a direct transmission from Sri Lanka (Eng Jin Ooi 2022, 99–100). For that reason, it is likely Mizuno was working either from what Eng Jin calls the Ayutthaya Recension or the Bangkok Recension, both of which provide “detailed explanatory text” for an additional eight questions of inference, possibly accounting for the greater length noted by Mizuno (Eng Jin Ooi 2022, 88–89). For further discussion on the *Anumānapañha* in the manuscript witnesses of Thailand, see Eng Jin (2022, 87–90; 2021, 322–63).

using the allegory of a city, which includes walls, moats, watchtowers, a palace, streets, and different shops on these roads, such as a flower shop, a fruit shop, perfume shop, a shop for medicine and the like.⁷⁷ In this allegory, each feature of the city represents a distinct facet of the Buddha’s teachings. For example, “the place where three or four roads meet is the Abhidhamma, the law-court is the Vinaya, the streetway is the [fourfold] application of mindfulness” (Mil trans. Horner 1969a, II:173) (Mil 332,⁸⁻⁹). What is remarkable about the Mil-a is that

it hardly touches upon these [various other aspects of the city], having a unique explanation. The majority of it explains the fruit shop, discussing the three states of concentration (*samādhi*) that are the realisation of *suññataphala-samāpatti* [(“the fruit of emptiness”)], the realisation of *animittaphala-samāpatti* [(“the fruit of the signless”)], and the realisation of *appañihitaphala-samāpatti* [(“the (state) free from desire”)]. (Mizuno 2000, 19)

While this explanation of the fruit shop is found in the root text (Mil 333,²⁹⁻³⁰), the Mingun Jetavana uses these passages to launch into a “highly technical [discussion of the] practices and fruits” of meditation not contained in the original (Mizuno 2000, 25). This convoluted discussion leads the Mingun Jetavana to delve into concepts such as the knowledge of the rising and falling (of compounded phenomena) (*udayabbaya-ñāṇa*), the knowledge of dispassion (*nibbidā-ñāṇa*), and the knowledge of the desire for deliverance (*muñcitukamyatā-ñāṇa*), to name just a few (Mizuno 2000, 25). The Mingun Jetavana introduces these concepts as part of a dense discussion on the sixteen stages of *vipassanā* knowledge (*vipassanā-ñāṇa*) as outlined in Buddhaghosa’s

⁷⁷ The Mingun Jetavana’s elaboration on this allegory is not altogether surprising since the city as allegory for the Buddha’s teachings is a common motif in Pali and Sanskrit literature and was especially prevalent in Thai imagery of the eighteenth century, where it was explicitly associated with different aspects of meditative progress (Terwiel 2019). This prevalence probably explains why this city narrative was also elaborated in the Thai version of the Mil Mizuno examined (2000, 18). Both B.J. Terwiel and Crosby (2020, 70) associate the Thai iterations of this allegory with *borān kammaṭṭhāna*, or “traditional meditation practice,” which they contrast (Crosby especially) with the *vipassanā* meditation as represented by the Mingun Jetavana’s teaching. Either way, the extrapolation of the metaphor of the city had relevance for those interested in meditation, whether *vipassanā* or *borān kammaṭṭhāna*.

Vism, the realisation of which is the goal of the Mingun Jetavana’s own method of meditation practice. In fact, when the monks flew to Mawlamyine to retrieve the MS of the Mil-a (fig. 3), the newspaper article states that they also brought back with them a MS of a second text, the *Vipassanā ñāṇ cañ kyamḥ krīḥ* (ဝိပဿနာဉာဏ်စဉ်ကျမ်းကြီး: *Great Treatise on Vipassana Levels of Attainment*) (1948, 1), demonstrating that this topic was important for the Mingun Jetavana at this stage in his teaching and writing career.

The final chapter in the Mil-a, the *Opammapañhākaṇḍa* (*Chapter on Questions on Similes*) (Mil-a 314-430), continues to magnify the Mingun Jetavana’s concern with meditation practice and theory. While “[t]he text of the *Opammapañhākaṇḍa* is the same for all the different editions” (Deshpande 1999, 21), there are major differences in the emphasis on specific questions, with “three questions that have about 10 pages and one question that has 26 pages” of additional explanation in the Mingun Jetavana’s commentary (Mizuno 2000, 21). For instance, while the second question in this chapter deals with the “five qualities of the cock to be taken up” (*P. kukkuṭassa pañca angāṇi gahetabbāni*) (Mil 366,¹²⁻¹³), qualities related to the practice of ascetism, Mizuno makes clear that the Mingun Jetavana uses this question as an opportunity “to explain the basics of Buddhist practice for 17 pages” from Mil-a 315 to 332 (Mizuno 2000, 25). Within these 17 pages the Mingun Jetavana outlines what Mizuno calls “the *abhivinaya* practices related to yogis” (Mizuno 2000, 25), that is, forms of moral practice like *indriyasamvara* (“control of the sense faculties”) that are related to but not actually contained in the 227 rules of the *pātimokkha*, the monastic code found in the Vinayapiṭaka. Such *abhivinaya* practices are presented in these 17 pages as necessary before one enters meditation as an ascetic in a forest or in isolation, hence the Mingun Jetavana relates these moral practices to the four foundations of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) and other aspects of his own method of meditation. Like in the

Meṇḍakapañhākaṇḍa, the Mingun Jetavana is using oblique references and subtle cues in the Mil to bring together issues of both monastic discipline and meditation practice in a creative way not made explicit in the root text, framing his comment on this question as an *uddesavāra*kathā (“discourse as an opportunity for explanation”). Mizuno mentions several other similar examples in the *Opamma*pañhākaṇḍa chapter of the Mil-a “where profound wisdom and enlightenment are explained in detail which are not explained in the root text” (Mizuno 2000, 27). Remarkably, such explanations, which are inspired by the topics of the root text but far exceed the scope and details given therein, “include methods of [meditation] practice that do not exist in the Tipiṭaka or commentaries of Pali Buddhism” (Mizuno 2000, 27), suggesting the Mingun Jetavana is using the Mil as a platform to develop or present his own understanding of meditation practice and theory.

With this outline of the Mil-a in hand, it is possible to further qualify Deshpande’s statement that “with slight differences in allocation of text to different divisions, the basic Pali text of the *Milindapañha* seems to remain the same in different editions” (Deshpande 1999, 21). While the different editions might share many of the same features in terms of the number and order of questions, it can be said that the Burmese and Thai editions seem to place varying degrees of emphasis on and supply further details for sections of the Mil that diverge from Trenckner’s edition, especially regarding the *Anumānapañhā* and *Opamma*pañhā chapters. Indeed, the editions surveyed above represent a small sample, and since Trenckner only used one Burmese MS and avoided Thai material altogether, further study should reveal even greater divergences.⁷⁸ It still is not possible to know exactly what text, either from hardcopy or from

⁷⁸ In the preface to his edition, Trenckner explains that he chiefly resorted to two MSS that he refers to as the “Copenhagen MSS,” both of which are Sinhalese in origin (1880, iii). Both Copenhagen MSS are rife with

memory, the Mingun Jetavana was using as the basis of his commentary, but it is not surprising that his text matches the Sixth Council edition in terms of layout and chapter headings, even if the Mingun Jetavana's commentary seems to indicate possible idiosyncrasies in terms of how he understands the divisions of the root. These idiosyncrasies could be explained by the possibility that the Mingun Jetavana was working from a palm-leaf MS predating the Fifth Council, or perhaps, that he conceived of a different role for the Mil that necessitated adding new chapter divisions and a simplified presentation of the individual questions therein, such as an aid in teaching or even memorisation for potential readers. Indeed, one of the unique features of his commentary is the clear demarcation of every question using numerals, rather than descriptive subheadings like Trenckner's and the Sixth Council edition.

Yet even if the questions and their order remain largely the same, it can be said that the Mingun Jetavana has redirected and at time reimagined the Mil and created his commentary not as a text reducible to the root, but as his own contribution to the recensions thereof. For while the Mingun Jetavana acknowledges the words and themes of the Mil and took pains to explicate them, he often diverted these explications into new directions not immediately obvious in or

'omissions' and 'absurd readings,' hence Trenckner had to avail himself of a Burmese MS as well (1880, iv). This Burmese MS contains a more correct Pali etymology and spelling (Trenckner 1880, iv). In the words of Trenckner, the Burmese MS "presents, not the traditional text of the Sing. MSS., but a revised one, like many other Burmese copies especially of uncanonical writings" (1880, v). The number and nature of the MSS that Trenckner availed himself of suggests that the Trenckner edition is somewhat artificial. Though technically predating the formation of the Pali Text Society, it seems that Skilling's assessment of such editions as "too often confluents of the readings of an arbitrary and limited selection of manuscripts" (2014, 364) also applies to Trenckner's Mil. The problem with the dominance of Trenckner's edition, both by scholars and textual communities, is that despite the authoritative status of Trenckner's edition and its similarity with the MS described by von Hinüber, Skilling notes that a "comparison of the Thai-script and roman-script editions reveals serious problems. The printed Siamese edition differs *noticeably and significantly* from the received "European" edition — in contents, in sequence of topics, and in phrasing" (Skilling 2010, 5) (italics in original). Skilling further stresses that the "important point here is not that the Siamese printed edition is a different or deviant version, while Trenckner's is the standard, but rather that the transmission of the *Milindapañhā* is extremely tangled, and goes beyond such a twofold model" (Skilling 2010, 12). In other words, there is currently no "correct" or singular Pali *Milindapañhā*, but rather, several overlapping versions distinct in significant and substantial ways.

explicitly connected to the root text. As was shown above, these directions often led to issues about monastic discipline, meditation, or the tangents between the two. In this sense, the Mingun Jetavana composed an *aṭṭhakathā* rooted in but unique when compared to the classical *aṭṭhakathās* he is modelling his text after, which often faithfully follow the word order and content of their root texts. This divergence is no surprise considering the question-answer format and many dilemmas of the Mil, which would encourage any commentary written on it to deviate from the norm, or at least would provide ample opportunity for creative readings according to the commentator's preference and predilections in answering the questions posed in the text or fully fleshing out its many dilemmas. Moreover, the Mingun Jetavana did not have any previous commentarial sources on the Mil to work from, at least not earlier layers of *aṭṭhakathā* like those that make up the classical *aṭṭhakathās*. If he did have previous authoritative commentaries on the Mil to consult, this fact would have restrained his ability to make digressions and interpolate concepts not found in the root text, or at least make such digressions all the more conspicuous. There are, however, different forms of exegesis on the Mil that predated the Mingun Jetavana's contribution, of some of which he was aware. To further understand in what ways the Mil-a is singular as a commentary but also draws on previous, more localised forms of exegesis, the discussion now takes up two of the exegetical forms composed on the Mil in South and Southeast Asia during the last millennium.

2.3 *Milinda-ṭīkā*

While there is no known *aṭṭhakathā* on the Mil before that of the Mingun Jetavana, its oldest extant form of exegesis is the *Milinda-ṭīkā*, a type of subcommentary usually written to explicate paracanonical texts or *aṭṭhakathās* themselves (Norman 1983, 148). Also known as the

Madhuratthapakāsinī, (an alternate title of the *aṭṭhakathā* to the *Buddhavaṃsa* as well), the *Milinda-ṭīkā* was composed according to its final verses by a Mahātipiṭaka Cūḷabhayatthera (Jaini 1986, xii) (hereafter the Cūḷabhayatthera). It consists in manuscript form of “188 leaves with five lines on each side of leaf, written in ink in fine legible Cambodian characters” (Jaini [1961a] 1986, vi). This text was first edited by P.S. Jaini in 1960 and republished by the Pali Text Society together with a reprint of the *Mil* in 1986. In roman script it covers 73 pages. The exact provenance of the *Milinda-ṭīkā* is uncertain: while it is stated in the final verses “that this *Ṭīkā* was written in the Island of Lankā, in the Mahāvihāra where the assembly of traditional Elders (paramparā theragaṇā) is well established (susaṅṭhitā)” (Jaini [1961a] 1986, xii–xiii), the only known MS was found in Thailand by P. Tuxen sometime in 1922-1924 (Jaini [1961a] 1986, vi). Jaini further points out that “neither the Ceylonese Chronicles nor the most recent catalogue of the Temple MSS. in Ceylon mention this work” (Jaini [1961a] 1986, xiii). Due to the presence of the placename Bingaraṭṭha in the text, “identified by G. Coedès with the modern Cheing-mai in Thailand,” Jaini surmises that the author may have belonged to a Sinhalese *saṅgha* established in Chiang-Mai in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, with the reference “to the Mahāvihāra of Lankā [made] only to add prestige” (Jaini [1961a] 1986, xiii). In terms of the date of composition, Jaini explains that “most of the works referred to in the *Ṭīkā* (e.g., the *Abhidhānappadīpikā*, the *Abhidhammāvatāra-ṭīkā*, the *Vinayavinicchayaṭīkā*, the *Khuddasikkhā-ṭīkā*) were written during the reign of Parākramabāhu (1153 A.D.), in the latter part of the 12th century A.D. It is, therefore, certain that this *Ṭīkā* could not have been written earlier than the beginning or the middle of the 13th century A.D.” (Jaini [1961a] 1986, xiii). According to the date stipulated in the colophon and references to ruling monarchs, Jaini settles on the year 1474 for the composition of this text, to which both Norman (1983, 150) and von Hinüber (2000, 86)

agree. The *Milinda-ṭīkā* is not so much a commentary to a commentary, as per a typical *ṭīkā*, but appears to be of the second type mentioned above, namely, an unmediated exegesis on a paracanonical work. It can therefore be concluded that the Mil was not part of the Tipiṭaka proper in Thailand nor Sri Lanka in the fifteenth century; otherwise, the author might have used the word *aṭṭhakathā* for this composition, just as the Mingun Jetavana did almost five centuries later. Due to its likely Thai origins and relatively later date, the *Milinda-ṭīkā* was not known outside of Thailand, or at least the Mingun Jetavana and his contemporaries do not seem to be aware of this text in Burma, for it is not mentioned in the introductory chapters of the Mil-a.

It is important to note that this *ṭīkā* includes in a final section called the *Gāthāsarūpaṃ* an index of proper names and quoted verses from the Mil (Jaini [1961a] 1986, vi). Critically, the number of quoted verses “given in the *Gāthāsarūpaṃ* do[es] not agree with our extant edition” of the Mil (Jaini [1961a] 1986, xi). To explain this discrepancy, Jaini suggests that some of these verses “were additions made to the Miln. at some later period and after the writing of our *Ṭīkā*,” indicating that there were probably several different recensions of the Mil circulating in Southeast Asia in the second millennium (Jaini [1961a] 1986, xi), anticipating the recent findings of Eng Jin Ooi (2021; 2022). The discrepancies between the number of verses collected in the *Milinda-ṭīkā* and what is seen in editions consolidated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is thus another reason to “raise questions about the date and form of our modern editions” (Norman 1983, 50). It is somewhat problematic to precisely match the *Milinda-ṭīkā* to modern editions, however, because while this subcommentary consists mostly of definitional glosses of words and concepts found in the root text, not every word is systematically commented upon. With perhaps an overly rigid definition of “commentary” in mind, this lack of systematic word explication led Jaini to lament that “the *Milinda-ṭīkā* has little value as an

exegetical work. Although the *Milinda-pañha* abounds in difficult terms and abstruse doctrinal points meriting a scholarly exposition, our author has chosen only a small number of words for comment and leaves untouched several points of interest” (Jaini [1961a] 1986, viii). Horner, who retranslated the *Mil* in 1963, similarly remarks that she has “been able to refer to [the *Milinda-ṭīkā*] in a few footnotes; yet it must be admitted that its author comments on only a minimum of words and, even then, though on occasion his reading may be preferred to that of *Miln.*, his exegesis can seldom be called revealing” (Horner 1963, viii).⁷⁹ While many of Jaini’s and Horner’s observations are valid, I surmise that part of the frustration here with the *Milinda-ṭīkā* is due to what Paul Dundas refers to as “western notions of exegesis *qua* the providing of a running explanation of the root text” (Dundas 1996, 78), that because the *Milinda-ṭīkā* does not adhere to such notions of a “running explanation,” which does not deviate from the content and focus of the root text as currently conceived, both Jaini and Horner impugned the utility of this subcommentary.

However, the author of the *Milinda-ṭīkā* might have had a different purpose in mind when composing his text. For not only is the *Milinda-ṭīkā* selective in terms of which words are commented upon, but there is a decided bent towards grammar and the methods of interpretation in the subcommentary itself, at least in the opening pages. As Normans points out, “the text starts with a detailed description of the six-fold way of commenting upon the meaning of a word”

⁷⁹ In contrast, Skilling reports that when the Thai *Mil* translation was revised in the twentieth century (the latest edition of which is from 1985), the translator “states that when he compared the National Library version with the Pali he found that the translation was defective in many places. He was inspired to make a new, accurate, and complete translation, without adding to or cutting from the original, but supplementing the translation with explanations from the Pali *Ṭīkā* on the *Milindapañhā*” (Skilling 2010, 3). Hence while both Jaini and Horner did not find the *Milinda-ṭīkā* helpful or illuminating, it does figure prominently in a modern translation of the text in Thailand.

(Norman 1983, 150). In his own edition, Jaini traces this quote to the *Mukhamattadīpanī* (Jaini [1961b] 1986, 1), “a tenth-century commentary on the *Kaccāyana* grammar and its paraphrase (*vutti*)” (Gornall 2020, 95).⁸⁰ Indeed, Alastair Gornall explains that the “first evidence of such a systematic and repetitive use of these [six] techniques occurs in Vimalabuddhi’s *Mukhamattadīpanī* (Gornall 2020, 95), adding that virtually the same wording as found in the *Kaccāyanasuttaniddesa* (and hence the *Milinda-ṭīkā*) is supplied “at the beginning of Vimalabuddhi’s discussion of Kaccāyana’s second rule” (Gornall 2020, 113).⁸¹ Gornall goes on to describe that when the sixfold formula was introduced to Pali literature, it was meant to apply to the text as a whole, but it became systematically applied to each *sutta* rule of grammatical texts during what he calls the “reform era” in Sri Lanka, 1157-1270 (Gornall 2020, 95). The fact that the *Milinda-ṭīkā* begins with this sixfold formula locates the subcommentary squarely within this tradition of grammatical treatises and was surely a signal to its readers that the author intended to deal with issues of syntax in the root text.⁸²

Such an inclination towards grammar is not surprising in the *Milinda-ṭīkā*, since “a vast majority of the Pāli works composed in medieval Burma are texts of grammar (P. *vyākaraṇa*),

⁸⁰ Like the *Mukhamattadīpanī*, the *Kaccāyanasuttaniddesa*, composed “by Chapaṭa Saddhammajotipāla of Pagan, Burma, [in the] fifteenth century A.D” (Ruiz-Falqués 2014, 393), has *sambandho ca padañ ceva padattho padaviggaho codanā parihāro* (Kacc-nidd 4,¹⁷⁻¹⁸), the latter six terms identical to those found in the *Milinda-ṭīkā* (Mil-ṭ 1,¹⁵⁻¹⁶). The same passage is also found in the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha-saṅkhepavaṇṇanā* (Abhid-s-nt 1,¹⁴⁻¹⁵), another text attributed to Chapaṭa Saddhammajotipāla, which Alastair Gornall and Ruiz-Falqués call a “local subcommentary” to Anuruddha’s *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* (2019, 431). Note that these numbers to the Kacc-nidd and Abhid-s-nt are according to Ruiz-Falqués (2014, 399).

⁸¹ Gornall adds that its “awkward placement, however, suggests that the verse is not original to the *Mukhamattadīpanī*” (Gornall 2020, 113).

⁸² As Gornall points out, for a more comprehensive discussion of the various schemes of commentarial strategies and their occurrences in Pali texts, see Kieffer-Pülz, Petra. 2013. *Verlorene Gaṇṭhipadas zum buddhistischen Ordensrecht: Untersuchungen zu den in der Vajirabuddhiṭkā zitierten Kommentaren Dhammasiris und Vajirabuddhis*, Teil 1 (Veröffentlichungen der Indologischen Kommission 1). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag. Pages 86-95.

semantic analysis (P. *nirutti*), lexicography (P. *abhidhāna*), and similar types of philological sciences” (Ruiz-Falqués 2015, 3). There was also a parallel, if less pronounced, emphasis on grammar in Thailand when the *Milinda-ṭīkā* was composed (Gornall and Ruiz-Falqués 2019, 431). Grammar was such an important part of the Pali landscape that before efforts to create a closed canon in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the “Tripiṭaka [in Thailand] meant the complete corpus of Pali literature, divided into four—not three—main categories: *sūtra*, *vinaya*, *paramattha*, and *saddā* (Sūtra, monastic rules, Abhidhamma, and grammar)” (Skilling 2014, 361). Yet these “Pāli grammatical treatises were not meant to teach the Pāli language to beginners. They were rather meant to teach how to interpret the Pāli scriptures” (Ruiz-Falqués 2015, iii). This pedagogical need helps explain why the grammatical analysis of the *Milinda-ṭīkā* is coupled with a concern for second-order exegesis, that is, commenting on the act of commenting. As Bond explains, “the *Ṭīkā*s had a scholastic interest in the process of interpretation. The *Ṭīkā*s not only explain the suttas and Commentaries but also describe and analyze the methods of interpretation” (Bond 1982, 176). A preoccupation with the strategies of commentary is thus an idiosyncratic feature of *ṭīkā*s, for as Lily De Silva claims, “none of the aṭṭhakathās contain an enumeration of the methods of exegesis, as do the *ṭīkā*s” (De Silva 1970, lxxiii). In this sense, the *Milinda-ṭīkā* is not just a subcommentary or a commentary on a paracanonical text, but a sort of meta-commentary, one that is explicating the act of exegesis itself. Given his interest in grammar and selective glossing of words that would allow him to indulge this interest, perhaps the Cūḷabhayātthera composed his text as a pedagogical tool and was only instrumentally concerned with the contents of the Mil. In other words, the root text was but a means to a larger end. If this is true, the Cūḷabhayātthera’s *ṭīkā* appears not to be directed at a general audience, but to specialists in grammar and exegesis, or rather, to aspirants thereof.

One would in fact expect an author with a title like “Mahātipiṭaka” to be especially concerned about such issues. Hence the Cūḷabhayatthera was working within a distinct commentarial framework, responding to the expectations of both his chosen exegetical category and possibly the interests of his contemporary readership. The frustration of Jaini and Horner thus partly lies in their own expectations of what a *ṭīkā* should be, overlooking how this type of subcommentary was meant to function when the Cūḷabhayatthera was composing his text in Southeast Asia.

A second possible reason for the frustration of Jaini and Horner with the *Milinda-ṭīkā* is their understanding of the nature of the root text. Jaini echoes the views of many modern scholars when he emphasises that the Mil “abounds in [...] abstruse doctrinal points meriting a scholarly exposition” (Jaini [1961a] 1986, viii). As mentioned in the last chapter, the philosophical nature of the Mil and its connection with the Abhidhammpiṭaka is usually pronounced over other possible readings. Yet was the text understood or valued in fifteenth century Southeast Asia within the same framework? While the first third of the *Milinda-ṭīkā* is preoccupied with grammatical analysis, the last two-thirds are devoted to tracing and explicating allusions to the *jātaka* stories found in the root text, much to the consternation of Jaini ([1961a] 1986, vii). He laments that despite his high hopes for the *Milinda-ṭīkā*, “the work proved to be of little promise. Of the 188 leaves only the first 46 contain what can properly be called a Ṭīkā on the text” (Jaini [1961a] 1986, vii). The bulk of the remaining leaves, 125 in total, form what is titled the *Jātakuddharaṇaṃ* (*Extracting the Jātakas*), where the “author was not content with merely tracing these verses or stories to their original source, but found here a good opportunity to increase the bulk of his Ṭīkā by reproducing all the 24 Jātakas [referenced in the Mil] together with their introductions (nidānas)” (Jaini [1961a] 1986, viii–ix). Jaini summarises his discontent by proclaiming that “as a result of this bulky intrusion our MS appears more like a short book of

Jātaka collections than anything that can be called an adequate commentary on the Mil” (Jaini [1961a] 1986, ix). There is thus a sharp cognitive dissonance here on two levels between Jaini’s expectations and the author’s vision for his text: on one level, the *Milinda-ṭīkā* does not fit the model Jaini has for “an adequate commentary on the Mil,” while on another level, the Cūḷabhayātthera does not seem to appreciate the true value of the text he was commenting on according to Jaini, which is Buddhist philosophy and not mere narrative literature. The “intrusion” of the *jātaka* material in the *Milinda-ṭīkā* suggests that for the Cūḷabhayātthera and his contemporaries in fifteenth-century Thailand, the Mil could be made to serve multiple functions not always in line with how the text has been received over the last century and a half among scholarly circles in Europe, America, and Japan.

What is critical to realise is that the Mingun Jetavana also seems to follow the model of the Cūḷabhayātthera at times, which is partly why his *aṭṭhakathā* prompts its own cognitive dissonance when read by modern scholars. For one, the Mingun Jetavana is also not exhaustive in his glosses, sometimes isolating just a few words or phrases from a given passage and pivoting on these words to provide an explication that magnifies the importance of his selections in the root text for several additional paragraphs or pages. In contrast, he can sometimes reduce several pages in the root to just a few sentences, especially after he has just given an extended explanation of a related or overarching topic. Just like the Cūḷabhayātthera and his *Jātakuddharaṇaṃ*, the Mingun Jetavana also quotes long excerpts verbatim from his source texts over several pages, especially the Vism or texts from the Vinayaṭīka and their commentaries. Indeed, his explication of the first chapter of the Mil, the *Pubbayogaṇḍa*, consists mostly of pages and pages of bulky, blunt excerpts from the Vism, meaning that the Mil-a at times appears more as a manual on the Vism and the *abhiññās* rather than as an “adequate commentary on the

Milindapañha,” in the words of Jaini. Likewise, the Mingun Jetavana’s discussion on the *bhikkhuṇī-upasampadā* in the *Meṇḍakapañhākāṇḍa* contains several pages from the *Suttavibhaṅga* of the Vinayaṭṭaka in support of his argument, giving the impression of a handbook meant for someone studying this issue in need of easy reference to the source material.

Part of the explanation for these overlapping styles is that the Mingun Jetavana, like the Cūḷabhayaṭṭhara, did not have a previous *aṭṭhakathā* to consult or constrain him, nor was he aware of the *Milinda-ṭīkā* or any other Pali subcommentaries. The Mingun Jetavana is thus more akin to Dhammapāla than Buddhaghosa, the former enjoying “much more freedom and discretion to compose the sub-commentaries than the commentaries. The sub-commentaries are the works of freehand, and therefore everything therein can be regarded as a reflection of Dhammapāla’s own comprehension of Buddhism” (Endo 2013, 211). Hence like the freedom afforded by writing a *ṭīkā* subcommentary, the Mil-a is a more “independent and creative” work, to borrow from Endo (Endo 2013, 211), allowing the Mingun Jetavana ample latitude to direct his commentary according to his own interpretative interests and the needs of his readership. Indeed, like the Cūḷabhayaṭṭhara, the Mingun Jetavana appears not to have a general audience in mind but rather aims his glosses and explanations at a specialised group of readers. Here, instead of focusing on the *jātakas*, the Mingun Jetavana is interested in *vipassanā* meditation, monastic discipline, and the tangents between the two, suggesting that he also valued the Mil differently from the mainstream of modern interpreters. Moreover, the relative freedom shown by the Mingun Jetavana in composing his commentary demonstrates that he is working from a different commentarial paradigm from modern scholars, that he at times views the purpose of his exegesis in a different framework when compared to the “western notions of exegesis” mentioned by Dundas above (Dundas 1996, 78). In this, the Mil-a shares features with the *ṭīkā* form as it

developed in South and Southeast Asia in the second millennium, but his text also has evidence of influence from the *nissayas* of Burma, a topic taken up in the next section.

2.4 *Milinda-nissaya*

While the Mingun Jetavana does not seem to have been aware of the *Milinda-ṭīkā*, he acknowledges two other exegetical texts on the Mil circulating in Burma in the first half of the twentieth century. It is written in the *Nidānakathā* of the Mil-a that

two books frequently are found with the nature of supporting the *Milindapañha*: both the pure Burmese (*maramma*) commentary known by the name of the *Milindapañhā-vatthu* (*Story of the Milindapañha*), with the contents of the book famous among the supports of the moral precepts (*sīla*), and a [bilingual] commentary of the meaning in the Burmese (*maramma*), known by the name of the *Milindapañhā-nissaya* (*Support of the Milindapañha*), composed to make accessible the meaning of the [Pali] words [in the vernacular].⁸³

While there does not seem to be any explicit citation to either of these texts in the Mil-a aside from this initial reference, the *Milindapañhā-nissaya* (hereafter the *Milinda-nissaya*) is of special interest for this chapter. It is not clear which *nissaya* the Mingun Jetavana is referring to in his Mil-a, since there are records of numerous *Milinda-nissaya* texts before this time.⁸⁴ Yet since the Mingun Jetavana had connections with Ashin Ādiccavaṃsa introduced in Chapter One,

⁸³ *api cedaṃ milindapañhāpakaraṇaṃ parisīlayantānaṃ parivāragantharabhūtā milindapañhāvathunāmena pākaṭa suddhamarammavaṇṇanā ceva padatthavivaraṇavasena viracitā milindapañhānissayanāmena pākaṭā marammaatthavaṇṇanā cā ti dve ganthā bahuso upatthambhabhāvena vijjanti* (Mil-a 1,²¹⁻²⁵)

⁸⁴ Lammerts mentions that a Burmese monk named Guṇālaṅkāra wrote a *nissaya* on the Mil c. 1765 (D. Christian Lammerts 2018, 111). According to Rhys Davids, “Mr. J. G. Scott, of the Burmese Civil Service, has sent to England a Burmese Nissaya of the Milinda” (1890a, xvii). This *nissaya* must therefore predate 1890 and could be that composed by Guṇālaṅkāra. The *nissaya* in question may be in the Scott Collection at the Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives. The temporal range of this collection is from 1750-1900, as Scott stopped collecting around 1900 (Dalby 1988, 273), so it is possible that this *nissaya* comes from the mid-eighteenth century or earlier. However, no MS is titled the *Milindapañhā-nissaya* in the Scott Collection, though several unnamed MSS are listed, and the Burmese manuscripts are uncatalogued (Dalby 1988, 273). There is also at least one *Milinda-nissaya* in the Fragile Palm Leaf collection copied in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, author unknown.

especially through the former's prominent lay student and meditation teacher, U Myat Kyaw (ဦးမြတ်ကျော် Uḥ Mrat kyau a.k.a., မင်းကွန်းဓမ္မကထိက ဦးပဏ္ဍိဓမ္မ Mañḥ kvanḥ dhammakathika Uḥ Paṇḍidhamma 1884-1947; hereafter Myat Kyaw (Prumḥ khyau 2009, 332; 334)), it is likely that he was referring to Adiccavamsa's 1916 *nissaya*, which appears to be the only *Milinda-nissaya* in print in Burma today.

According to the *Cha rā tau arhaṅ ādiccavaṃsa atthuppatti* (ဆရာတော် အရှင်အာဒိစ္စဝံသ အတ္ထုပ္ပတ္တိ *Biography of the Sayadaw Ashin Ādiccavaṃsa*; hereafter the *Ādiccavaṃsa atthuppatti*), Adiccavamsa wrote 400 books in his lifetime and was known as a gifted scholar with diverse interests not limited to Buddhism (Mraṅ. chve [1965] 2017, i).⁸⁵ He published his *Milinda-nissaya* in 1916 around the age of 34 after 14 years in the monkhood (Mraṅ. chve [1965] 2017, 61). It is related in the *Ādiccavaṃsa atthuppatti* how Adiccavamsa was commissioned to write this *nissaya* by the Aggamahāpaṇḍita, the Yadanabon Sayadaw (ရတနာဘုံပုံဆရာတော် Ratana bhum pyaṃ Cha rā tau, a.k.a. အရှင်ကေတုမာလာလင်္ကာရ Arhaṅ ketumālalaṅkāra, 1866-1948; hereafter the Yadanabon) (Lha sa min 1961, 139), who explained:

because other Pāli [texts] already have [*aṭṭha*] *kathā* exposition[s], in the past, there were *nissayas* written [for them]. As there is no *aṭṭhakathā* exposition [for] the *Milindapañha*, it is not easy to write [its] *nissaya*. Since [that which should have been] written was not written, [the Mil] is lacking by remaining [with] one empty place. This place that is lacking is a place for you. Therefore, [I] request [that you, Adiccavamsa,] write a *nissaya* for the *Milindapañha-pāli* so that this gap is filled.⁸⁶ (Mraṅ. chve ([1965] 2017, 61)

⁸⁵Tin Lwin mentions that a certain “Ādiccavaṃsa composed a *nissaya* of the difficult passages in the *Abhidhammatthavibhāvanī* and eventually refers to it as [a *gaṅṭhi*]” (1961, 11), but Tin Lwin does not give any further biographical information on this Ādiccavaṃsa, nor does he list this work in his bibliography, so it cannot be confirmed that this author is the same Ādiccavaṃsa who composed the *Milinda-nissaya*.

⁸⁶ အခြားပါဠိတော်များမှာ အဖွင့်ကထာကလည်းရှိ၍ ရှေးကပင် နိဿယများရေးပြီး ရှိကြပေပြီ။ မိလိန္ဒပဉ္စပါဠိတော်မှာ အဖွင့် အဋ္ဌကထာမရှိ၍ နိဿယရေးရန် မလွယ်ကူ၊ ရေးလည်း မရေးခဲ့ကြ၍ နေရာလွတ်တစ်ခုအနေနှင့် ဟာနေသည်။

Just like the Mingun Jetavana, the Yadanabon was motivated by the lack of an *aṭṭhakathā* for the Mil, exhorting Adiccavamsa to fill this exegetical lacuna by writing a *nissaya* on the text. What is curious is that even though the Yadanabon seems to be implying that there was no *nissaya* for the Mil previously, there was at least one *Milinda-nissayas* dating to before the twentieth century. Unlike the Mingun Jetavana, the Yadanabon did not think it necessary or perhaps even possible to write an *aṭṭhakathā* on the Mil, though it was precisely the lack of this type of commentary that was most glaring. The Yadanabon’s omission indicates how truly unprecedented the commentary of the Mingun Jetavana was in Burma.

Another important point captured in the words of the Yadanabon is the idea that without a “*kathā* exposition” (အဖွင့်ကထာ *aphvaṅ. kathā*), it is difficult to compose a *nissaya*. Indeed, when saying that “because other Pāli [texts] already have [*aṭṭha*]*kathā* exposition[s], in the past, there were *nissayas* written [for them],” the Yadanabon implies that the latter is derivative of the former, that an *aṭṭhakathā* is a sort of prerequisite for the composition of a *nissaya*. The Yadanabon further stresses the difficulty facing Adiccavamsa when he states that

as much as having to write a *nissaya* on treatises that have an *aṭṭhakathā* [or] *ṭīkā* exposition [is not easy], due to the *Milindapañha* not having an [*aṭṭha*]*kathā* exposition, having to write a *nissaya* is even more difficult! Yet although there is no [previous] *aṭṭhakathā* exposition, the *Milindapañhā-nissaya* was extremely good in so far as it was praised whenever knowledge of the *piṭaka* managed to grow.⁸⁷ (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 61)

ဤဟာနေသော နေရာသည် ငါ့ရှင်အတွက် နေရာဖြစ်သည်။ ထို့ကြောင့် ထိုဟာကွက်ကို ဖြည့်သောအားဖြင့် မိလိန္ဒပဉ္စပဉ္စိတော်ကို နိဿယ ရေးစေလိုသည် ([1965] 2017, 61)

⁸⁷ မိလိန္ဒပဉ္စပဉ္စိတော်မှာ [...] အဖွင့်ကထာ မရှိသောကြောင့် နိဿယရေးရသည်မှာ အဖွင့်အဋ္ဌကထာဋီကာရှိသော ကျမ်းများကို နိဿယရေးရသည်လောက် မလွယ်ကူပေ။ ထိုသို့ အဖွင့်အဋ္ဌကထာ မရှိသော်လည်း ပိဋကဉာဏ်ရင့်သန်တိုင်း ချီးကျူးရလောက်အောင် မိလိန္ဒပဉ္စနိဿယသည် ကောင်းမွန်လှပေသည် (Mrañ. chve (မြင့်ဆွေ) [1965] 2017, 61).

As the Yadanabon mentions the lack of both an *aṭṭhakathā* and *ṭīkā* for the Mil, it further confirms that the *Milinda-ṭīkā* was unknown in Burma at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet despite the challenge posed by writing a *nissaya* on a text without a pre-existing commentarial infrastructure, the *Milinda-nissaya* of Adiccavamsa was highly praised. Indeed, his composition appears to have become a sort of standard for students of Pali, because “at that time, since the *Milindpañha* was then a book prescribed for translation in the government *pathama pran* exam (ပထမပြန်စာမေးပွဲ *pathama pran cā meḥ pvai*),⁸⁸ the *nissaya* that was compiled by the sayadaw also came to be treated as a manual for learners of Piṭaka literature and [by those] people taking part in the exam”⁸⁹ (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 62). The role the *Milinda-nissaya* had in preparations for the government Pali examinations further support the idea that it was Adiccavamsa’s text referenced in the Mil-a and is probably the reason why this *nissaya* is still in print today—more than a century after its first publication.

This brief introduction of the *Milinda-nissaya* affords an opportunity to discuss the role of *nissayas* in Burma generally and the influence these bitexts had on the Mingun Jetavana. A *nissaya* is an interphrasal or interlinear bilingual gloss of Pali into Burmese, where a single or a set of Pali words from the root text is given, then explained with Burmese equivalents in a type

⁸⁸ The *pathama pran* exams are government run, entry level exams and have been occurring at least since the seventeenth century (Dhammasāmi 2004, 2; Hla Thazin Bo 2011, 22). According to Khammai Dhammasami, these exams are meant to furnish monastics with “a foundation in Buddhist scriptures” and are held annually throughout Burma in April (2004, 57). Interestingly, Dhammasami writes that that Mil and the *Peṭakopadesa* “had never been a part of monastic curriculum even before formal examinations became popular” (2004, 151), hence the inclusion of the Mil during the time of Ādiccavamsa perhaps represents an increase in the importance of this text in Burma.

⁸⁹ ထိုအချိန်က မိလိန္ဒပဉ္ဇပါဠိတော်မှာ အစိုးရပထမပြန်စာမေးပွဲတွင် ဘာသာပြန်အတွက် ပြဋ္ဌာန်းထားသော စာအုပ်ဖြစ်ရာ ဆရာတော် ပြုစုသော နိဿယကိုလည်း စာမေးပွဲဝင် ပုဂ္ဂိုလ်များနှင့်တကွ ပိဋကစာပေ လေ့လာသူတိုင်း၏ လက်စွဲပြုရာစာအုပ် ဖြစ်ခဲ့ရပေသည် (Mrañ. chve (မြင့်ဆွေ) [1965] 2017, 62).

of running translation-cum-commentary. Trent Walker refers to such bilingual glosses in the Theravāda world as “bitexts,” which can also be found in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos (Walker 2020, 676). He explains that the “literary culture of second-millennium mainland Southeast Asia, excepting Vietnam, emerges from the encounter between classical Indic languages and local vernacular languages. At the crux of this meeting between Indic and local vernaculars are Indic-vernacular bitexts” (Walker 2020, 675). In fact, according to Walker, “[s]uch bitexts [...] form a significant portion of all extant written material produced between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries” in mainland Southeast Asia (Walker 2020, 676). What is important for the purposes of this chapter is the idea that in the centuries prior to the Mingun Jetavana’s commentary, *nissayas* “occupied a critical place in the intellectual culture” of Burma and other Theravada countries in the region (Walker 2020, 698). Given that he was trained in this intellectual culture, it is necessary to understand the methods of *nissaya* bitexts to “appreciate [the] mainland Southeast Asian approaches to language and thought in the early modern period” (Walker 2020, 698) from which the Mingun Jetavana drew when composing his *aṭṭhakathā*.

Attempts at articulating the methods and styles of *nissaya* bitexts have been undertaken by Tin Lwin (1961), John Okell (1965), William Pruitt (1994), and most recently, Walker (2018; 2020; 2022). Taking a comparative approach of such texts across Southeast Asia, Walker provides the most expansive account of the techniques of *nissaya* bitexts, distilling them to three main stages: “selection, analysis, and presentation” (Walker 2020, 678). My focus here is on the latter two, analysis and presentation, because there is evidence in his commentary that the Mingun Jetavana is incorporating some of the features of bitexts into his own *aṭṭhakathā*. In terms of presentation, Walker lists four ways that an author tailors their *nissaya* for a specific audience, either for philological and language training, to provide a specialised scholastic

exegesis, as a homiletic narrative, or to give a “poetic aesthetic expansion” of the root text in verse (Walker 2020, 677–78).⁹⁰ As was mentioned in the last section, the Mil-a at times corresponds more closely to a *ṭīkā* or *nissaya* than an *aṭṭhakathā* in the sense that it presents a more specialised reading of the root text, in this case, by amplifying issues of *vipassanā* and *vinaya* briefly mentioned, implied, or altogether absent in the Mil itself. In other words, the Mingun Jetavana is redirecting the root text for audiences where these two concerns—and the relationship between them—are of paramount importance, such as for monks living and training at one of his meditation centres. While classical *aṭṭhakathās* are not bereft of an agenda and certainly tailor their content, they were aimed at a more general audience and were less specialised in their presentation when compared to a *nissaya*. Indeed, this bilingual form of exegesis affords its author more flexibility in how he or she presents the material—at least one aspect of *nissaya* bitexts the Mingun Jetavana adopts in his *aṭṭhakathā*.

Another aspect of *nissayas* that the Mingun Jetavana partly adopts is the mode of analysis found in such bitexts. For unlike his predecessors composing *aṭṭhakathās*, the Mingun Jetavana is especially preoccupied with making explicit the grammatical components of the root text. This is not to say that grammar was neglected by commentators like Buddhaghosa, who “occasionally discussed the points of grammar in order to explain a syntactical problem, a particular construction or the derivation of a particular word” (Deokar 2008, 66). However, Mahesh Deokar argues that the *aṭṭhakathās* were more concerned with assisting readers in comprehending and explaining the Buddha’s words, and were “not [to] be used for teaching

⁹⁰ These types of presentation partially overlap with the *nissaya* styles identified by Tin Lwin, such as verbatim translation (1961, 6), free translation (1961, 7), ornate translation (1961, 8), and translation with short notes (1961, 10), however, given the sheer numbers of *nissaya* bitexts in second millennium Southeast Asia, no one scheme can cover the full variety and range of such texts.

Pali” or explaining rudimentary grammar to beginners (Deokar 2008, 390). Certain types of *nissayas*, however, were for precisely this purpose, which the Mingun Jetavana points out when he writes that the *Milinda-nissaya* was “composed to make accessible the meaning of the [Pali] words [in the vernacular]” (see above). For in these bitexts, Burmese words are interspersed in Pali sentences to render the meaning of the Pali words and the foreign grammar of the sentence intelligible to the Burmese reader. Okell expands on this same point when he explains that *nissaya* bitexts “were intended not only to give the reader the meaning of the Pali text but also to enable him [or her] to construe its grammar” (Okell 1965, 187). It is for this reason that the *Milinda-nissaya* became an integral study aid for those monastics taking the entry-level Pali exams.

What is unique in the Mil-a is that the Mingun Jetavana often adapts this same pedagogical technique for his commentary, taking pains to gloss Pali words with a range of synonyms and break down the rudimentary grammar for his readers as though he were teaching Pali at the same time as explicating the root text. For instance, there are numerous examples when the Mingun Jetavana glosses a phrase or word with its near equivalent, such as “[the phrase] ‘the king spoke’ means the king tells” (P. *rājā āhā ti rājā vadati*) (Mil-a 93,⁶) or “[the word] ‘by the reason’ means the cause” (P. *hetunā ti attho*) (Mil-a 101,²⁷), glosses redundant for anyone advanced enough to read the Mil in Pali, but maybe not so for someone who is using the commentary to learn or practice this prestige language. There are also many instances where simple grammar is being conveyed, such as “[the participle] ‘was lit’ means the lamp which was lit” (P. *padīpito ti padīpo padīpito*) (Mil-a 94,¹⁴), where the Mingun Jetavana is making explicit the implied referent of the adjectival participle *padīpita*, which should be obvious to all except beginners in Pali. Other examples of obvious semantic or syntactical points are when the Mingun

Jetavana breaks compounds, like the following instance: “[the compound] ‘last consciousness’ means the last consciousness” (P. *pacchimaviññāṇo ti pacchimaṃ viññāṇaṃ*) (Mil-a 94,²²), which seems to only function insofar as it is making explicit the adjectival relationship between the first and second parts of the kammadhāraya compound. Consider also “[the phrase] ‘make a simile’ means [the king] requests” (P. *upamaṃ karohī ti āyācati*) (Mil 96,²⁴). The purpose of this explanation appears to be making clear the imperative mood of *karohi* by glossing it with *āyācati* (“to request”), a word that conveys the imperative mood semantically but not in terms of its verbal form. Such explanations add little to one’s understanding of the root text, but rather appear targeted to someone using the commentary to learn or practice Pali, just like one would use a *nissaya* when studying for a *pathama pran* exam.⁹¹

Often the Mingun Jetavana pairs these terse glosses with longer explanatory passages, but sometimes his whole explication of a question in the root text is dominated by these short comments. When explaining the seventh question in the *Addhānavagga* (*Section on Time*), the Mingun Jetavana uses the following series of glosses: “in the seventh [question], [the word] ‘enough’ means it is an inappropriate [question]. [The word] ‘declared’ means announced. ‘Attendance’ means service. ‘Acting properly’ means to do proper moral conduct, about this [compound] it is said ‘acting properly.’ ‘Excellent’ means [Nāgasena’s answer] was correct”⁹²

⁹¹ My point is not to deny that there are classical *aṭṭhakathās* with a similar methodology, such as the *Paṭisambhidāmagga-aṭṭhakathā*, which has what von Hinüber calls “lexicon verses” that function almost as a dictionary (von Hinüber 2000, 144). But von Hinüber goes on to clarify that “[o]ne of these verses is attributed to the old *Aṭṭhakathā*,” which suggests that “this method of explanation could be much older than the new *Aṭṭhakathā*, which appears to quite readily abandon it” (von Hinüber 2000, 144). Hence the Mingun Jetavana’s simple lexical and syntactic glosses seen in the examples above are not the norm for the *aṭṭhakathā* genre as a whole, which by and large evolved beyond such rudimentary explanations of the root text.

⁹² *sattame alaṃ ti ayuttaṃ. akkhātaṃ ti ārocitaṃ. adhikāraṃ ti upakāraṃ. yuttakārī ti yuttaṃ kātuṃ sīlametassā ti yuttakārī. kallo sī yutto asi* (Mil-a 102,¹⁷⁻¹⁹).

(Mil-a 102,¹⁷⁻¹⁹). In this series of glosses, the commentator is essentially supplying his readers with a synonym for each word, adding little of exegetical value to the text aside from semantic and syntactical elucidation. There are several cases, however, where the Mingun Jetavana does not even supply synonyms for each word being glossed, such as when he comments on the fifth question in the *Iddhibalavagga* (*Section on the Various Supernormal Powers*):

In the fifth [question], ‘faulty’ means faulty together with the dregs. ‘Possessed with refuse’ is the meaning. ‘Possessed with blame’ means together with blame is with blame. ‘Possessing defect’ means together with fault is possessing defect. ‘[When] the cause has been removed’ means when the fleshy eye [(i.e., the eye organ)] is lost. ‘[When] without a cause’ means when there is a non-existence of a cause. ‘[When it is] without a basis’ means when there is no basis [for it], in the *sutta* it is said ‘there is no arising of the divine eye.’⁹³

In this passage the Mingun Jetavana breaks each word into its component parts, reusing the same word but in a different grammatical form to explain its meaning in the root text. For example, when explaining *sadosaṃ* (“possessed with blame”), he glosses the prefix *sa* with a periphrastic construction, supplying the adverb *saha*, which goes with the instrumental *dosena* (“with blame”), then repeats the word *sadosaṃ* to stress to the reader that the two are semantically equivalent if syntactically distinct. In this instance, the Mingun Jetavana is not just explaining the meaning of the text but making its grammar clear to the reader, just as a *nissaya* text would do with Burmese particles specialised for this purpose.⁹⁴ What is striking here is that when such simple glosses occur consecutively like the selections above, the Mil-a essentially reads like a

⁹³ *pañcame sakasaṭaṃ ti saha kasaṭena sakasaṭaṃ. sakacavaraṃ ti attho. saniggahaṃ ti saha niggahena sanigghaṃ. sadosaṃ ti saha dosena sadosaṃ. hetusamugghāte ti maṃsacakkhusmiṃ natṭhe. ahetusmiṃ ti asati hetusmiṃ. avatthusmiṃ ti asati vatthusmiṃ natthi dibbacakkhussa uppādo ti sutte vuttaṃ* (Mil-a 170,³⁰⁻³⁴)

⁹⁴ Okell (1965) and Pruitt (1994) offer extensive lists of such particles, many of which are adapted from the Indo-European, inflectional Pali to capture the case, tense, mood, or number of a given word or compound in the Tibeto-Burmese, post-particulate Burmese language context. One example, according to Okell, is the Burmese particle *mha*, meaning from a certain place or time, which is considered to derive from the Pali ablative suffix *sma* (Okell 1965, 193).

monolingual Pali *nissaya*, since the Mingun Jetavana is explaining word by word and phrase by phrase with synonyms or by reusing words in different grammatical forms, though in this case, glossing Pali with Pali. It is not that the entirety of the Mil-a follows this *nissaya* style, but there are enough instances where a pattern begins to emerge and the influence of the *nissaya* style on his writing must be considered.

Conclusion

This is all not to say that the kind of pedagogical glossing I am describing above is limited to the *nissaya* form.⁹⁵ Indeed, it is a category mistake to make a hard and fast distinction between *aṭṭhakathās*, *ṭīkās*, and *nissayas*, for as Walker cautions, the exegetical methods of *nissayas* “are best understood” as extensions of the “scholastic project of Pali commentaries into a bitextual context” (Walker 2020, 698). In this sense, while *nissaya* bitexts “are typically not a radical departure from monolingual Pali commentaries, they may offer new lines of inquiry or emphasis” (Walker 2022, 277). Like *nissayas*, *ṭīkās* are also an extrapolation of the Pali commentarial project and have their own lines of inquiry and emphasis, as the example of the *Milinda-ṭīkā* demonstrates. Since his commentary comes possibly a millennium after the last *aṭṭhakathā* was composed and given the dominance of *nissayas* and subcommentaries in the literary culture in which the Mingun Jetavana trained, it would be surprising if he had *not* adopted some exegetical techniques from Pali-Burmese bitexts and subcommentaries into his

⁹⁵ For instance, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, a relatively later addition to the *Khuddakanikāya* and a text that the Mingun Jetavana often quotes in his *aṭṭhakathā*, contains certain chapters that are “commentaries on Suttas from the *Anguttara* and *Saṃyutta Nikāyas*. The[se chapters] [...] use rather mechanical repetitive treatments for their comments and serve in part as dictionaries” (Ñāṇamoli [1962b] 1977, liii). Ñāṇamoli points out chapters “4, 8, 10-4, 16, 17, 19, 20, 24, 26, 28, and 29” in particular ([1962b] 1977, liii).

Mil-a. Since for him, the lines between *aṭṭhakathās*, *ṭīkā*s, and *nissayas* were probably less sharp than for scholars coming to Pali literature after first being trained in Sanskrit and who are taught to prioritise canonical texts and medieval commentaries over later, localised Pali or bilingual exegeses. The consternation of Jaini with the *Milinda-ṭīkā* partially demonstrates this fact. Instead, the Mingun Jetavana was probably introduced to Pali through vernacular loanwords and bitexts; he most likely approached the Tipiṭaka and *aṭṭhakathās* not directly but through the mediation of subcommentaries, handbooks, and manuals. What I am highlighting as the innovations of his Pali commentary likely did not appear as very innovative to him but were a natural extension of the Pali commentarial project into the literary landscape of early twentieth century Burma. The Mingun Jetavana had his own lines of inquiry and points of emphasis, deploying a range of exegetical techniques available to him to bring forth such ideas and incorporate them into the Tipiṭaka and his understanding of the root text.

Hence my argument is not that the Mingun Jetavana was influenced by the *Milinda-nissaya* specifically (and it is unlikely he was even aware of the *Milinda-ṭīkā*), but that he was drawing resources from the intellectual and literary culture of early-modern Burma where the *nissaya* form in general was dominant and where subcommentaries had a critical role in monastic education. Indeed, it is the “legacy of bilingual composition [that] still binds together much of the written heritage of Theravada Buddhism,” thus the unique quality of the Mil-a “challenges us to view Pali scriptures and commentaries as dependent upon a specific set of shared bitextual techniques for successful transmission and performance” (Walker 2022, 283). In other words, as the Yadanabon pointed out above, *nissayas* are in a sense derivative of *aṭṭhakathās* and *ṭīkā*s, but if this is so, then a twentieth-century *aṭṭhakathā* is partly derivative of *nissaya* bitexts and *ṭīkā* subcommentaries. The exegetical categories introduced in this chapter thus form a sort of

continuum where the direction of influence is not unilateral but mutualistic. In other words, there is an overlap and overflow between these categories such that an *aṭṭhakathā* leaves its impression on a *ṭīkā* or *nissaya* but also, as in the case of the Mil-a, the *nissaya* and *ṭīkā* forms can impress upon an *aṭṭhakathā*. As such, it cannot really be said that the Mil-a is a *ṭīkā*- or *nissaya*-like *aṭṭhakathā*; rather, it must be recognised that since his *aṭṭhakathā* is coming after a millennium of literary development of Pali in dialogue with increasingly nested subcommentaries and specialised bilingual glossaries, the Mingun Jetavana is composing his commentary at a time when Pali-Burmese interplay is the dominant form of exegetical expression and Pali texts are mediated through increasingly localised subcommentaries.

As I implied above, however, the Mil-a is not completely defined by these adaptations. The Mingun Jetavana in fact deploys a range of exegetical techniques that often signal his continuity with *aṭṭhakathās* of the past. Indeed, it was this model that he was primarily trying to emulate, the prestige associated with this form of exegesis he was striving to invoke. To understand how the Mingun Jetavana follows the *aṭṭhakathā* model, it is crucial to note that his first such commentary was not composed on the Mil but on the Peṭ. The second last text in the *Khuddakanikāya* in Burma coming just before the Mil, the Peṭ is described by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli not as an *aṭṭhakathā* itself but as a guide for would-be commentators (Ñāṇamoli 1964, xxiv). Having introduced the Mil-a and some of its unique characteristics, I will now move to explicate its techniques and methods more closely in the next chapter, discussing how the Mingun Jetavana follows the strategies of past *aṭṭhakathās* and how these techniques carry him beyond the text and into a form of social commentary and critique.

3 The Spectrum of Exegesis and the Process of Making Meaning: From Syntax to Semantics and Towards the Social

Introduction

While the Mil-a is innovative in how it approaches and interprets the root text, especially with a focus on meditation theory and monastic discipline coursing through its pages, such innovations are made within the parameters of the South Asian commentarial tradition grounded in the *aṭṭhakathās* and extrapolated in the *ṭīkās*, *dīpanīs*, *nissayas*, and other forms of exegesis found throughout the Theravada world. Central to the cohesion of this tradition is the various schemes of commentarial techniques enumerated in Sanskrit and Pali sources. Though a variety of different terms and typologies are used, these schemes share a familial relationship that outlines the tasks and responsibilities of a commentator when elucidating a root text embedded within a broader, authoritative textual corpus. Arguably the most fundamental of such lists in Pali literature is the sixfold enumeration found in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* (*Explanation of the Hidden Meaning*), the *ṭīkā* to the *Dīghanikāya-aṭṭhakathā* (*Commentary on the Collection of Long [Discourses]*). According to this list, the commentator is responsible for establishing the historical, doctrinal, and intertextual connections of the root text with the Buddha's teachings as a whole; they must focus their explication on the word level and slot these words into broad grammatical categories; the commentator is tasked with deploying grammatical analyses between words and breaking down compounds; they must clarify the meaning of terms in both a conventional and specialised sense, and the exegete must pre-emptively raise questions about the root text only to resolve such questions and explain away apparent contradictions threatening the

unity of the textual corpus. In this chapter, the characteristics of each of these six exegetical techniques from the Mil-a are reviewed, demonstrating the Mingun Jetavana's familiarity with the methods of the Theravada commentarial project and their continued relevance in twentieth-century Pali literature.

By examining examples of such techniques in the Mil-a and comparing these examples with other commentaries, the purpose of this chapter is to provide a technical vocabulary and methodological framework to understand how the Mingun Jetavana's interpretation of the Mil is uncanny in the sense of being both unprecedented and grounded in familiar exegetical strategies fundamental to the commentarial project. For while the Mingun Jetavana's reading of the root text is innovative in many ways, his unconventional style of explication and his extended asides, especially in terms of meditation and *vinaya*, are made possible by the interplay and at times repurposing of exegetical strategies he inherited from South Asian and Burmese scholar monks. The standardisation of these commentarial techniques into lists of five, six, eight, and so on was thus not meant to constrain commentators and stifle their creative production, but rather, to capture the full range and fluidity of the tools and techniques at their disposal, a fluidity that allows commentators to proclaim and even reinforce the authority of the root text while providing novel insights into and revitalising it for more contemporary audiences outside the immediate textual community being addressed. In other words, the ability to innovate when interpreting authoritative, purportedly immutable root texts is not a defect of the system of Theravada commentary, but one of its most defining features.

Stemming from such creative dynamism built into the Theravada commentarial project, the second purpose of this chapter is to highlight a progression in the standardised lists themselves. Rather than being a mere enumeration of isolated items, the commentarial strategies

found in a text like the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* enable the commentator to progress along a spectrum of exegesis, beginning with a concern for the intertextual integrity of the root text vis-à-vis the Tipiṭaka, moving to a probe of the grammar and mechanics of expression, breaking into the social act of making meaning, and defending the tenets of the root text in their own community for current and future readers. Such a progression reflects the structure of this chapter, with each section addressing a different component of the sixfold strategies of commentary found in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*. This spectrum, however, is hardly a terminal process, since commentarial word-analysis involves not only explaining a given word's grammar, but in invoking the interplay between grammar and semantics, sign and signifier; the semantics of a given word, in turn, is not limited to the setting of a single text or even to the religious system in which that word is meant to function, but extends to the social world of meaning-making where such systems are themselves up for debate; finally, the act of defending the tenets of a root text in a broader landscape of religious debate necessarily leads back to the first strategy, that of ensuring a text's internal coherence and the intertextual integrity of the fuller corpus of which it is a part. This iterative but non-repeating process can be self-contained in a single commentary, but often spills over into future commentaries, subcommentaries, new-subcommentaries, bitexts, translations, handbooks, digests, and combinations thereof. Recognising this recursive process at play in the Mil-a allows us to unpack the historical context of this work and its sociopolitical ramifications in the chapters to come, beginning with the meditation technique and lineage of the Mingun Jetavana which so influenced his own composition and practice of commentary.

3.1 Different Schemes of Commentarial Techniques

There are many different schemes of how a commentator writing in one of the languages of Theravada Buddhism should explicate a root text. The *Milinda-ṭīkā*, for instance, begins its explication of the root text with six ways of commenting on a *sutta*. While Jaini traces the enumeration of such strategies to the *Mukhamattadīpanī* which can be found in other grammatical and Abhidhamma works, the account given in the *Milinda-ṭīkā* can ultimately be traced back to the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* (*Explanation of the Hidden Meaning*),⁹⁶ the *ṭīkā* to the *Dīghanikāya-aṭṭhakathā* (*Commentary on the Long Discourses*) ascribed to Dhammapāla working sometime between the 6th and 10th centuries CE.⁹⁷ When beginning his exposition of the first *sutta* in the *Dīghanikāya*, the *Brahmajāla Sutta* (*Discourse on Brahma's Net*), the subcommentator supplies the following list of exegetical techniques, probably the earliest extant account in Pali literature:⁹⁸ “Then there are said to be six manners of completely explaining [a root text, namely] ‘according to connection (*sambandhato*), according to the word (*padato*),

⁹⁶ The *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* is, properly speaking, the *purāṇaṭīkā*, or “ancient subcommentary,” on the *Dīghanikāya-aṭṭhakathā*. Primoz Pecenko (2002; 2009) in particular has shown that there are at least two historical sets of subcommentaries, writing that the “authorship of the *purāṇaṭīkā*s (called *Līnatthapakāsnī*) is usually ascribed to Dhammapāla and that of the later *ṭīkā*s (called *Sāratthamañjūsa*) is ascribed to Sāriputta of Poḷonnaruva” (2002, 62). In his more recent piece, Pecenko goes on to explain that “according to some Pāli bibliographic sources and catalogues of Pāli manuscripts held in various libraries in Burma and Sri Lanka, there seems to exist another set of the subcommentaries on the four *nikāyas* which has been ignored or omitted by the Theravāda tradition and considered either ‘lost’ or ‘non-existent’ by modern Pāli scholarship” (Pecenko 2009, 5), namely, the set named *Sāratthamañjūsa*.

⁹⁷ The dates of Dhammapāla are a longstanding *desideratum* in the study of Pali literature. For an overview of different theories on Dhammapāla’s period of composition, see Petra Kieffer-Pülz (2013, Teil 1:85).

⁹⁸ This is not to say that such self-reflexive accounts of commentarial activity do not predate the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*, rather my point is that the standardization of such lists is first attested to in this subcommentary. For example, as Norman points out, included in the *Pātimokkha* of the Vinayaṭīka is a “simple type of commentary [...] whereby words are for the most part explained by synonyms or clarification of terms” (Norman [1992] 2012, 149). Signaling the exegetical nature of such an exercise, the text uses the name “*pada-bhājanīya*,” or “word analysis” for this section of the *Pātimokkha* (Norman [1992] 2012, 150). It is likely that the subcommentators were especially sensitive to such second order terms scattered throughout the Tipiṭaka and *aṭṭhakathās* and that the lists seen in texts like the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* were the result of the collection and standardization of such terms by later exegetes, who were also likely responding to similar efforts in Sanskrit commentarial literature on the subcontinent.

according to word analysis (*padavibhāgato*), according to the meaning of the word (*pad'atthato*), according to questioning (*anuyogato*), and according to protecting (*parihārato*)”⁹⁹ (Sv-ṭ I 43,⁶⁻⁷).

Since this list comes at the beginning of the commentary on the first *sutta* in the first collection of the Suttapiṭaka, these techniques are presented as covering the *aṭṭhakathā* in general.

Contrasting their use in later grammatical texts, where all the items in these lists are directed at a single *sutta* (in the sense of a hyper-condensed syntactical rule), Gornall writes that “[e]arly commentators viewed these lists as procedures for commenting on a work or text as a whole” (Gornall 2020, 95). Hence these six techniques can be found operating throughout a given commentary, though usually without explicit reference to the terms found above (i.e., *sambandha*, *padavibhāga*, etc.). Indeed, such terms are not usually found in the *aṭṭhakathās* but in the *ṭīkās*, representing a secondi-order self-awareness of the exegetical project and its special techniques that emerged once the commentaries themselves became the object of explication in the subcommentaries.

Such lists of commentarial techniques are widespread in Pali literature and are also found in Sanskrit Buddhist sources.¹⁰⁰ Given their ubiquity in Pali and Sanskrit commentaries, Petra Kieffer-Pülz refers to lists such as that found in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* as examples of a “floating

⁹⁹ *atha vā chahi ākārehi saṃvaṇṇanā kātabbā sambandhato padato padavibhāgato padatthato anuyogato parihārato cāti* (Sv-ṭ I 43,⁶⁻⁷).

¹⁰⁰ There are also many instances of such lists in non-Buddhist sources. For example, Jonardon Ganeri, along with Gary Tubb and Emery Boose (2007, 3), cite a list from the *Nyāyakośa* of Bhimacarya Jhalakikar under the entry *Vyākhyānam*, quoting the *Parāśarapurāṇa*: “Commenting has five characteristic features: 1. word-division (*padaccheda*), 2. Stating the meaning of the words (*padārthokti*), 3. analysis of grammatical compounds (*vigraha*), 4. construing the sentences (*vākyayojanā*), 5. solving problems (*ākṣepeṣu samādhāna*).” A divergent reading [of the above statement] has it that there are considered to be six aspects of commenting, with solutions (*samādhāna*) and problems (*ākṣepa*) kept distinct” (Ganeri 2010, 189). While this list has some common features with that found in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*, some of the components seems to be especially concerned with the challenges posed by the Sanskrit language.

verse,” standard motifs recycled by various authors with overlapping variations (Kieffer-Pülz 2013, Teil 1:94). Gornall explains further that such lists are known to “differ and are variously five-fold, six-fold and eight-fold in their classification, though they all follow a similar pattern” (Gornall 2020, 94). For instance, Bond points out that in the *Visuddhimagga-ṭīkā*, there are said to be “eight categories or kinds of interpretation” used throughout the root text (Bond 1982, 131). He explains that the “eight methods enumerated in the *Ṭīkā*’s descriptions are ‘origin’ or ‘introduction’ (*nidāna*), ‘purpose’ (*payojana*), ‘condensed meaning’ (*piṇḍ’attha*), ‘word meaning’ (*pad’attha*), ‘connection’ (*sambandha*), ‘purport’ (*adhippāya*), ‘objection’ (*codanā*), and ‘clarification’ (*sodhanā*)” (Bond 1982, 131). Instead of the schema found in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*, this enumeration supplied in the *Visuddhimagga-ṭīkā* appears similar to that offered by the *Vyākhyāyukti*, a fifth century CE Sanskrit exegetical guide authored by Vasubandhu. Translated from the Tibetan but with an extant Sanskrit parallel in Haribhadra’s commentary on the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* (Nance 2012b, 250), the list in the *Vyākhyāyukti* reads as follows: “The purpose, together with the summary meaning, the meaning of phrases, connections, and objections and responses; [These five aspects] should be stated by those who propound the meaning of sutras”¹⁰¹ (VyY transl. Nance 2012a, 132) (square brackets in original). Here there are five terms instead of the eight of the *Visuddhimagga-ṭīkā* and the six of the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* (where criticism and rebuttal are treated separately), yet three of the first four terms listed in the *Visuddhimagga-ṭīkā* are also found in the *Vyākhyāyukti*, namely, purpose (P. *prayojana*, S. *prajojana*), condensed meaning (P. *piṇḍ’attha*, S. *piṇḍārtha*), and word-

¹⁰¹ The Sanskrit behind this passage, as found in Vaidya. 1960c. *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā with Haribhadra’s Commentary Called Āloka*. Darbhanga, India: Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, page 277, is *prayojanaṃ sapīṇḍārthaṃ padārthaḥ sānusamdhikah / sacodyaparihāraś ca vācyah sūtrārthavādibhiḥ iti / pañcabhir ākāraiḥ sūtraṃ vyākhyātavyam iti vyākhyāyuktau nirṇītam*.

meaning (P. *pad'attha*, S. *padārtha*), the first two of which are not found in the list cited from the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*. In fact, the first term of the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*, connection (*sambandha*), is listed as the fourth technique in the *Visuddhimagga-ṭīkā* and also comes at the fourth spot in the *Vyākhyāyukti* as *anusamdhika*. Hence while there certainly is a larger pattern as argued by Gornall, there is no single template followed by all exegetical texts—even by individual authors.

Complicating matters even further, sometimes several divergent lists are found in the same text, as evidenced by the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* itself. Much later in the subcommentary, after illustrating the six techniques mentioned above, Dhammapāla states that the “sutta’s meaning will be easily explained and readily intelligible once its origins (*samuṭṭhāna*), purpose (*payojana*), receptacle (*bhājana*), and condensed meaning (*piṇḍattha*) have been elicited. Therefore, these points will be treated here first”¹⁰² (Sv-ṭ I 245,¹⁰⁻¹²). This list, too, has much in common with the *Vyākhyāyukti*, though includes two components, origins (*samuṭṭhāna*) and receptacle (*bhājana*), not found in Vasubandhu’s text, while Dhammapāla’s second list does not have either criticism or rebuttal, which are widespread in most other enumerations. Bhikkhu Bodhi surmises that this second list “probably belonged to the standard exegetical equipment of medieval Indian scholasticism” beyond just the Pali textual communities (Bodhi [1978a] 2007, 36), but the relation of this list to the others is not straightforward and hence no one standard can be said to have existed. In yet another subcommentary ascribed to Dhammapāla, the *Nettipakaraṇa-aṭṭhakathā*, Kieffer-Pülz points out that there are three lists supplied at various points throughout the text that overlap with those found in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* and

¹⁰² *samuṭṭhānappayojanabhājanesu piṇḍ' atthesu ca niddhāritesu sukarā hoti suviññeyyā ca, tasmā suttadesanāya samuṭṭhān' ādīni paṭhamam niddhārayissāmi* (Sv-ṭ I 245,¹⁰⁻¹²)

Vyākhyāyukti. The first list, which appears to be the most unique enumeration, has origin (P. *samuṭṭhāna*), intention (P. *adhippāya*), word meaning (P. *padattha*), criticism (P. *anuvādo*), contradiction (P. *virodha*), and sequence (P. *anusandhiyā*)¹⁰³ (Kieffer-Pülz 2013, Teil 1:87). The second list is the same as that found in the *Vyākhyāyukti* (*payojana*, *piṇḍattha*, *pad'attha*, *anusandhi*, *codanā*, and *parihāra*) (Kieffer-Pülz 2013, Teil 1:87), while the third last has context (P. *upogghāta*), word resolution (P. *padaviggaha*), word meaning (P. *padattha*), criticism (P. *cālana*), and rebuttal (P. *paccupaṭṭhānaṃ*) (Kieffer-Pülz 2013, Teil 1:88),¹⁰⁴ which is essentially the same as the first list mentioned in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* but does not include *pada* and has different terms referring to the same techniques (such as *upogghāta* in place of *sambandha* and *cālana* instead of *codanā*). Interestingly, the third list in the *Nettipakaraṇa-aṭṭhakathā* shares much in common with one given in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsini-abhinavaṭṭikā*, or the “very new-subcommentary” on the *Dighanikāya-aṭṭhakathā*, composed in Burma around 1800 by Ñāṇābhivaṃsa (Kieffer-Pülz 2013, Teil 1:91),¹⁰⁵ demonstrating that such lists of commentarial techniques still had currency in Southeast Asia just over two centuries ago, at least the techniques as found in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*.

¹⁰³ Referring to page 37 of the CSCD, Kieffer-Pülz compiles the first list from the following: *tathā hi ye keci suttassa samvaṇṇanāpakārā niddisīyanti. settathidaṃ: suttassa samuṭṭhānaṃ vattabbaṃ, adhippāyo vibhāvetabbo, anekadhā padattho samvaṇṇetabbo, vidhi anuvādo ca veditabbo, virodho samādhātabbo, anusandhiyā anurūpaṃ nigametabban ti, tathā suttassa payojanaṃ piṇḍattho anusandhi codanā parihāro ca atthaṃ vadantena vattabbā ti. tathā upogghātapadaviggahapadatthacālanaṃpaccupaṭṭhānāni vattbbāni ti*

¹⁰⁴ For a more detailed account of these variations in terminology and comparisons with non-Buddhist texts, see Kieffer-Pülz (2013, Teil 1:87–97).

¹⁰⁵ *ummugghāto padañ c'ev padattho padaviggaho, cālanaṃ paccupaṭṭhānaṃ chadhā samvaṇṇanaṃ vade* (Sv-nt, CSCD, I 141)

It is not the intention of this section to explain the variations in each list, but merely to signal that there is no single authoritative scheme and to explore some of the complex ways these lists interact with, relate to, and even subsume one another. One preliminary conclusion we can draw is that some of the items appear to be more fundamental, especially those in the first list of the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* (*sambandha*, *pada*, *padavibhāga*, *pad'attha*, *anuyoga*, and *parihāra*). Lily De Silva, the editor of the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*, states that the “*ṭīkā* writers seem to regard these [initial six] methods as compulsory techniques which must be adhered to by those wishing to explain the texts” (De Silva 1970, lxxiii). Indeed, these six techniques are foundational to the Pali commentarial project and capture the basic tasks of the commentator. When speaking about a similar list found in the Sanskrit *Nyāyakośa* (following the undated *Parāśarapurāṇa*), Ganeri explains that “[e]very commentary engages to a lesser or greater extent in the ‘bottom-up’ activity of explaining individual expressions in the text, thereby aiming to clarify the syntax of the text and to supply paraphrases of its lexical items, phrases and sentences” (Ganeri 2010, 189). According to the *Nyāyakośa*, this “bottom-up activity” is centered around “stating the meaning” of the words in the root text, usually “by using different words which have the same meaning” (Nyāyak trans. Ganeri 2010, 189). The primary aim of this elementary explication is “preventing confused opinion (*aratipatti*), contradictory opinion (*vipratipatti*), or contrary opinion (*anyathāpratipatti*)” (Nyāyak trans. Ganeri 2010, 189). Dhammapāla says something similar when describing the initial six techniques in his subcommentary, writing that they are meant to explain “the meaning of obscure passages in the commentary” (Sv-ṭ trans. Bodhi [1978] 2007, 215), passages liable to lead to confusion and contradiction. For a text like the *Mil*, which abounds in obscure passages, rare terms, and abstruse concepts, such clarification is a critical task facing any commentator. In the following sections, the six commentarial techniques of the

Līnatthavaṇṇanā will be taken in turn, showcasing how the Mingun Jetavana went about conducting the foundational work of commentating on the Mil within the framework these techniques provided. The sixfold list provided in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* is taken as a basis but not to the exclusion of the others; the other enumerations will also be employed when helpful to clarify a particular technique and to highlight the ways these diverse schemes interact and possibly influence one another.

3.2 *Sambandha* (Connection)

In the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*, the list of six commentarial strategies starts with *sambandhato*, meaning explicating the root text “according to connection” (hereafter *sambandha*). What is being connected? Dhammapāla clarifies that “here connection is said to be the connection of the teachings (*desanāsambandho*)”¹⁰⁶ (Sv-ṭ I 43,⁸). There are many ways one can interpret the compound *desanāsambandha*, but for the Cūḷabhayatthera, the author of the *Milinda-ṭīkā*, “the connection from what is said, therefore, should be understood [here]. This is twofold on account of supplying (*ajjhāhā*) and [on account of what was] stated beforehand (*yathāvutta*)”¹⁰⁷ (Mil-ṭ 1,¹⁷⁻¹⁸). Though the Cūḷabhayatthera does not dwell on the details of these two types of connection, Vasubandhu’s account in his *Vyākhyāyukti* helps to shed some light on the ways connections to the teachings are made. For him, *sambandha* (or the Sanskrit **anusamdhika* in his phrasing) is that “which allows readers to understand that the meaning of phrases is sequentially

¹⁰⁶ *tattha sambandho nāma desanāsambandho* (Sv-ṭ I 43,⁸)

¹⁰⁷ *ti vuttatā sambandho tāva vedītabbo. so cayathāvuttājjhāhā ravasena duvidho* (Mil-ṭ 1,¹⁷⁻¹⁸)

noncontradictory” (Nance 2012b, 117). One way for a commentator to show that the sequence is noncontradictory is to explain “the order in which particular items are discussed in a scriptural text,” such as the order of the Four Noble Truths, which could be explained in reverse order, beginning with enlightenment (P. *nibbāna*) rather than suffering (P. *dukkha*) (Nance 2012b, 117). Similar to the Cūḷabhayātthera’s connection with what was “stated beforehand,” Vasubandhu calls this technique making a “connection that pertains to the sequence of [what is] antecedent and subsequent” (*snga phyi nyid go rims kyi mtshams sbyar ba, *pūrvottaratākramānusamḍhi*) (Nance 2012b, 117). Another way to forge this kind of connection is to discuss the order of the text itself, to “[i]mpose a structure” on the different sections, chapters, or questions by arranging them into “thematically coherent and interconnected groups” (Ganeri 2010, 195).

Though it might seem a trivial matter unrelated to religious concerns, this sort of sequencing is precisely what the Mingun Jetavana aimed to accomplish through his table of contents, arguably his first act in “imposing a structure” on the Mil and an attempt to demonstrate that its string of questions and answers has a logical order and thematic unity. At the end of the *Ganthārambhakathā*, he outlines the structure for the Mil as a whole, which is given briefly in the root text but explained further by the commentator. After discussing the name of each chapter, the Mingun Jetavana breaks them down into sections (P. *vaggas*) according to his own numbering and into kinds of questions following the root text, commenting on the word “twofold” (P. *duvidha*) used to describe the chapters called *Milindapañha* and *Meṇḍakapañha* (*Questions on the Ram*). The Mingun Jetavana explains, for instance, that the *Meṇḍakapañha*,

in terms of sections (*vagga*), is eightfold, and in terms of questions, is twofold (*duvidho*). How, in terms of questions, is it twofold? One is a great section [where] some of [the questions] will be asked according to an extensive mass and heap [of questions, hence] it is called “Great Section” (*mahāvagga*). Another [type of] question is called “Question[s] on the Discourse of Yoga” (*yogakathāpañha*) [where] some of [them] will be asked

according to discourses on the yogi (*yogīkathāvasena*), thus in terms of questions [the chapter called “*Meṇḍakapañha*”] is twofold.¹⁰⁸

After this initial breakdown in the *Ganthārambhakathā*, the Mingun Jetavana begins each chapter by outlining the number and nature of the questions to be covered, then reviews what has been covered at the end of each chapter. Such actions of the Mingun Jetavana (along with Rhys Davids and other editors or translators who formulated their own table of contents for the Mil) seem to exemplify one aspect of the Cūḷabhayaṭṭhara’s connection with what was “stated beforehand,” showing how a word, phrase, or in this instance, section stands in relation to other words, phrases, or sections of the root text.

Vasubandhu also adds insight into the second type of *sambandha* mentioned by the Cūḷabhayaṭṭhara, that of “supplying” (*ajjhāhā*)” a connection, when he “emphasizes the need for commentators to supply their audience with relevant background information” (Nance 2012b, 117). The idea here is that “a good commentator should show the ways in which particular passages of a root text relate to other Buddhist texts and doctrines, in order to enable his [or her] listeners or readers to understand each passage as one that informs and is informed by traditional concepts” (Nance 2012b, 118). This second sense of *sambandha* links up with the definition supplied in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*, namely, the “connection to the teachings” (P. *desanā-sambandha*), meaning that one of the fundamental tasks of the commentator is to establish relationships between the root text and expressions of the Buddha’s teachings found elsewhere. One might say that the role of the commentator here is akin to that of an editor who reviews a text for any apparent confusion or ambiguity at the level of semantics, syntax, and doctrine in

¹⁰⁸ *vaggavasena aṭṭhavidho pi pucchāvasena duvidho va hoti/ katham pucchāvasena duvidho va hoti/ mahāvaggo ti ekaccānaṃ rāsipuñjamahantavasena pucchitabbo eko mahāvaggo/ yogakathāpañho ti ekaccānaṃ yogīkathāvasena pucchitabbo eko pañho ti evaṃ pucchāvasena duvidho va hot* (Mil-a 6,¹⁴⁻¹⁸)

order to maintain the integrity and coherence of the textual corpus as a whole. This editorial role demands that commentators like Buddhaghosa and Dhammapāla make explicit the intertextuality of the corpus by providing “cross-references” and “gloss[ing] earlier references to the older commentaries with specific references to the extant Pali commentaries” (Cousins 2013, 394). On a sectarian level, commentators-cum-editors function to provide a “systematic survey of the orthodox teachings not contradicting the interpretation of the learned monks of the Mahāvihāra” (von Hinüber 2013, 354), the monastic fraternity from Sri Lanka that became the basis of the Theravada as we understand it today. In this sense, the commentator must “smooth out” the root text such that apparent contradictions with other authoritative texts and doctrines are resolved and explained away. The key to this process is for the commentator to weave their voice into the intertextual “masses” that combine root material and the inherited commentarial tradition, making for a seamless aesthetic whole (von Hinüber 2013, 376). In this role as redactor, von Hinüber stresses that an exegete must go “beyond textual criticism” to understand the history of the texts themselves (von Hinüber 2013, 377), to ground the texts in the unfolding of the *sāsana* relative to the Buddha and the councils that codified his teachings.

One of the most basic ways to ground and orient a teaching in the historical unfolding of the Buddha’s dispensation is the *nidāna*, or the introduction of the text. As seen above, the term *nidāna* was given as the first of the eight commentarial techniques (or responsibilities) in the *Visuddhimagga-ṭīkā*, and the related term “origins” (P. *samuṭṭhāna*) came first in both the second (fourfold) list found in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* and the second list in the *Nettipakaraṇa-aṭṭhakathā*. In the sixfold list first quoted in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* above, Dhammapāla adds that *sambandha*

“is called by the worldly ‘*upugghāto*’”¹⁰⁹ (Sv-ṭ I 43,⁹). In her introduction, De Silva takes the ‘worldly’ (*lokiyā*) as referring to commentators working in Sanskrit and equates *upugghāta* with the Sanskrit *upodghāta* (1970, lxvii), which means “an introduction, preface; commencement, beginning” (Monier-William, s.v. *upod-ghāta*). In the third list of commentarial techniques found in the *Nettipakaraṇa-aṭṭhakathā*, *upogghāta* (which is the Pali cognate to *upodghāta*) is supplied in place of *sambandha*, while in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī-abhinavaṭṭikā* composed at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Burma, *ummugghāto* is used instead, which is rendered as “an indication of the region, time, preacher, etc., the introduction (နိဒါန်း: *nidānḥ*), the internal introduction etc. (အဇ္ဈတ္တိကစသောနိဒါန်း: *ajjhatika ca so nidānḥ*)”¹¹⁰ in the *Tipiṭaka pāli-mran mā abhidhān* (တိပိဋက ပါဠိ-မြန်မာအဘိဓာန် *The Tipiṭaka Pali-Burmese Dictionary*; introduced in Chapter One as the *Tipiṭaka abhidhān*) (TPMA, s.v. *ummugghāta*).

Making the overlap between *sambandha* and *nidāna* explicit, Dhammapāla reminds the reader that “in the sacred text[s], however, [Buddhaghosa], explaining according to the word etc. from the demonstration of *sambandha* by the Pali introduction (*nidānapāli*) showing the First Great Council, said, beginning with [his comment] “‘thus (*evaṃ*)’ is an indeclinable word,” [that] ‘this [term *sambandha*] should be known according to the Pali introduction (*nidānapāli*) and on account of the council in the Pali introduction (*nidānapāli*)” (Sv-ṭ I 43,⁹⁻¹³).¹¹¹ As is shown by Dhammapāla’s comment here, *nidāna* has two main senses: the first sense, as

¹⁰⁹ *yam lokiyā upugghāto ti vadanti* (Sv-ṭ I 43,⁹)

¹¹⁰ ဒေသကာလ ဒေသက စသည်ကို ညွှန်ပြခြင်း၊ နိဒါန်း၊ အဇ္ဈတ္တိကစသောနိဒါန်း

¹¹¹ *so pana pāliyā nidānapālivasena, nidānapāliyā pana saṅgītivasena veditabbo ti paṭhamamahāsangītiṃ dassentena nidānapāliyā sambandhassa dassitattā pad’ādivasena saṃvaṇṇanaṃ karonto evan ti nipātapadan ti ādiṃ āha* (Sv-ṭ I 43,⁹⁻¹³)

described in the Burmese definition above, is the “indication of the region, time, [and] preacher” (ဒေသကာလ ဒေသက စသည်ကို ညွှန်ပြခြင်း *desakāla desaka ca saññ kui ññvan pra khrañh*), which is supplied at the start of most *suttantas* in the Suttapiṭaka captured by the formula: “thus it has been heard by me” (*evaṃ me sutam*), which Dhammapāla references when he cites Buddhaghosa’s gloss of *evaṃ* as an indeclinable (P. *evan ti nipātapadan ti*). Such a statement indicates that what follows was recorded by an authoritative disciple like the Buddha’s attendant Ānanda who heard the discourse in person and can verify its accuracy. This introductory statement then proceeds to describe the preacher, usually the Buddha (or his top disciples, like Sāriputta or Mahākaccāyana), where the discourse took place (such as in the cities of Rājagaha or Vesāli) and when the teaching was laid down (during a specific rains or after an alms round). The phrase *evaṃ me sutam* and related formulas are essential, explains Buddhaghosa in the *Dīghanikāya-aṭṭhakathā*, because “by mentioning the time, place, teacher, background story, assembly, the region, [it] helps facilitate comprehension of this sutta, perfect in meaning and phrasing, illustrating the greatness of the spiritual power of the Buddha-qualities”¹¹² (Sv transl. Bodhi [1978b] 2007, 102) (Sv I 50,¹⁶⁻¹⁸).

The Mil is a special case, however, since it is part of the Suttapiṭaka even though the events depicted in the text occurred long after the Buddha passed into *parinibbāna*, hence neither Ānanda nor anyone alive at the time of the Buddha was there to witness the origins of the Mil. Nonetheless, the Mingun Jetavana seizes on a sort of *nidāna* in the prose opening of what the commentator calls the *niddesa* (detailed exposition), where the phrase “as that is heard” (P. *taṃ*

¹¹² *attha-vyañjana-sampannassa Buddha-guṇānubhāva-samsūcakassa imassa suttassa sukhāvagāhanattham kāla-desā-desaka-vatthu-parisā-padesa-patimaṇḍitam nidānam bhāsitam* (Sv I 50,¹⁶⁻¹⁸)

yathānussūyate) comes immediately after the initial verse summary (P. *uddesa*) introducing the Mil as a whole. Commenting on what he seems to perceive as the root text’s *nidāna*, the Mingun Jetavana explains that

The [phrase] “as that is heard” (*taṃ yathānussūyate*) which is instigated by the [imperative] “listen!” (*suṇāthā*) spoken in the [verse] summary (*uddese*), is that conversation (*taṃ kathaṃ*) spoken in the beginning of the detailed exposition (*niddese*) and afterwards with reference to applying oneself (*anuyogaṃ*) to the speech of those two, Milinda and Nāgasena, called the root of causes and conditions (*mūlaṭṭhānamūlakāraṇasaṅkhātāṃ*), which should be brought to the limit of the ear in due course (*anukkamena*). Here “just as that” (*taṃ yathā*) means that speech. “As it has been heard” means as it should come to the limit of the ear by and by. “Then” means in that speech of these two, Milinda and Nāgasena, called the root of causes and conditions, the city named Sāgala is the centre of trade and government (*nānāpuṭabhedanaṃ*)¹¹³ of the Yonakas.¹¹⁴

In this explanation, the Mingun Jetavana is taking “as that is heard” as a sort of stand-in for the standard-*sutta* phrase “thus it has been heard by me” (P. *evaṃ me sutāṃ*) and is supplying the name of the preachers and region, namely, Milinda and Nāgasena meeting in the city of Sāgala. What is missing, however, is the person relating the story, the role that Ānanda or Upāli play in the Suttapiṭaka and Vinayapiṭaka respectively. Indeed, no such person is ever indicated in the root text, which might give rise to doubt in some audiences about its historical authenticity. Instead, the Mingun Jetavana seems to put the onus of whoever is listening to the Mil at present, for such a one should “apply” (P. *anuyogaṃ*) themselves to the speech of the two protagonists,

¹¹³ *Putabhedana*, which literally means “the opening of packages,” is associated with Pāṭaliputta, the capital city of Asoka’s empire, which the Buddha foresaw in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* just before his death (*idaṃ agganagaraṃ bhavissati pāṭaliputtāṃ puṭabhedanaṃ*) (D II 87,³⁴-88,¹). I have translated it as the “centre of trade” following Thanissaro Bhikkhu’s translation of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, though Thanissaro notes that Trenckner translates the exact term above, *nānāpuṭabhedanaṃ*, as “surrounded by a number of dependent towns” (1879, I:29), giving the sense of both an economic and administrative centre.

¹¹⁴ *yaṃ panetaṃ suṇāthā ti uyyojitaṃ vacanaṃ uddese vuttaṃ taṃ kathaṃ niddese anukkamena tesāṃ dvinnaṃ milindanāgasenānaṃ mūlaṭṭhānamūlakāraṇasaṅkhātāṃ vacanaṃ anukkamena sotāvadhānetabbaṃ ti anuyogaṃ sandhāya taṃ yathānussūyate ti ādi vuttaṃ/ tattha taṃ yathā ti taṃ kathaṃ/ anussūyate ti anukkamena sotāvadhānetabbaṃ/ athā ti tesu tesāṃ dvinnaṃ milindanāgasenānaṃ mūlaṭṭhānamūlakāraṇasaṅkhātesu vacanesu yaṃ atthi yonakānaṃ nānāpuṭabhedanaṃ sāgalaṃ nāma nagaraṃ* (Mil-a 5,²¹⁻²⁸)

which is cryptically called here “the root of causes and conditions”

(*mūlaṭṭhānamūlakāraṇasaṅkhātāṃ*), perhaps referencing the cause of the text itself. He does, however, invoke the idea that this text has been handed down orally through a lineage “by and by” (*anukkamena*) before it was written down in the Fourth Council.

To make this case, the Mingun Jetavana needs to resort to the second sense of *nidāna* captured by the term “internal introduction etc.” (အဇ္ဈတ္တိကစသောနိဒါန်း: *ajjhatika ca so nidānḥ*) offered in the *Tipiṭaka abhidhān*, which might also be translated as “auto-introduction” or even “foreword.” This type of *nidāna* is what Dhammapāla means when he says, “the demonstration of *sambandha* by the Pali introduction (*nidānapāḷi*) showing the First Great Council” (*paṭhamamahāsaṅgītiṃ dassentena nidānapāḷiyā sambandhassa dassitattā*) and is when the history of a text’s compilations or of an entire *piṭaka* collection is related and established, especially in reference to the councils. Dhammapāla’s comment is referring to the *Dīghanikāya-aṭṭhakathā*, where Buddhaghosa spends the first 26 pages (in the P.T.S. edition) of his commentary laying out the events after the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*, where Mahākassapa convenes the First Council and Ānanda and Upāli recite the Sutta and Vinaya collections. Later in his subcommentary on the *Dīghanikāya-aṭṭhakathā*, Dhammapāla discusses the role of this second type of *nidāna* in the form of a question and answer. The interrogator asks “What was the purpose in including the introductory narrative in the compilation of the Dhamma and Vinaya? Shouldn’t the collection only have included the actual words spoken by the Buddha”¹¹⁵ (Sv-ṭ trans. Bodhi [1978b] 2007, 102) (Sv-ṭ I 70,²⁶⁻²⁸). To this query Dhammapāla replies: “The

¹¹⁵ *kasmā pan’ettha dhammavinayasaṅgahe kariyamāne nidānavacanaṃ, nanu Bhagavato vacanaṃ eva saṅghetabban ti?* (Sv-ṭ I 70,²⁶⁻²⁸)

introductory narrative serves to promote the durability, non-obscuration, and credibility of the discourse”¹¹⁶ (Sv-ṭ trans. Bodhi [1978b] 2007, 102) (Sv-ṭ I 70,²⁸⁻²⁹). Coming some five centuries after the Buddha’s *parinibbāna* by its own accounting, the Mil faces a potential lack of credibility and historical authenticity when compared with most other texts in the Suttapiṭaka; hence it is imperative on the Mingun Jetavana to also discuss this second sense of *nidāna* in relation to the Mil, to go “beyond textual criticism” and give the history of the texts themselves, in the words of von Hinüber cited above. As was seen in the first chapter of this dissertation, the Mingun Jetavana does exactly that when he traces the text to the Fourth Council in the *Ganthārambhakathā*, writing that

here what has been called the *Milindapañha* has been handed down in the lineage of King Milinda by 500 great Elders, arahants who chanted the three-basket *buddhavacana*, under whose authority it was made into a book—the *buddhavacana* that was preserved only orally and learned by heart orally in the Āloka cave at the time of King Vaṭṭagāmaṇi in the island of Sīhaḷa by the leading group of monks living in the Abhayagiri monastery, reciting it [along with] what is called the *nidānakathā* [introductory discourse] of this *Milindapañha*, a framing story (*bāhirakathaṃ*) two-fold because of its indication in brief (*uddesa*) and its exegetical exposition (*niddesa*).¹¹⁷

The invocation of the Fourth Council here helps makes sense of the Mingun Jetavana’s statement above that the speech of Nāgasena and Milinda “should be brought to the limit of the ear in due course” (P. *anukkamena sotāvadhānetabbaṃ*), since he is claiming that these questions and answers were gradually handed down in the lineage of Milinda orally before they were made into a physical text (P. *pothaka*) through writing. Such background information is an example of the *sambandha* commentarial technique in action and allows the Mingun Jetavana to ground his

¹¹⁶ *Vuccate: desanāya ṭhiti-asammosa-saddheyyabhāva-sampādan’atthaṃ* (Sv-ṭ I 70,²⁸⁻²⁹)

¹¹⁷ *tattha yaṃ pana vuttaṃ milindapañhaṃ/ tassa milindapañhassa nidānakathāsāṅkhātāṃ uddesaniddesavasena duvidhaṃ bāhirakathaṃ kathentehi abhayagirivāsigaṇapāmoḁkhehi sīhaḷadīpe vaṭṭagāmaṇirājakāle ālokaguhāyaṃ mukhena vācugataṃ mukheneva dhāritaṃ tepiṭakaṃ buddhavacanaṃ pothakārūḷhavasena saṅgāyantehi mahātherehi pañcasatehi arahantehi milindarājavamse āgataṃ* (Mil-a 4¹⁻⁶)

explanation of the phrase “as that is heard” (P. *taṃ yathānussūyate*) that opens the prose portion of the root text. In this way, these two senses of *nidāna* are distinct but inseparable, functioning together to “connect” the text being commented on to the councils, top disciples of the Buddha, and to the Buddha himself. *Sambandha* is thus not only a basic task of the exegete but is fundamental to establishing the coherence and authority of the root text itself—especially one with an ambiguous status in the Tipiṭaka like the Mil. In the words of Dhammapāla, “a discourse provided with an indication of the time, place, teacher, background story, and assembly endures long, remains free from obscurity, and is credible, like a business contract provided with notations of the place, date, merchandise, and conditions”¹¹⁸ (Sv-ṭ trans. Bodhi [1978b] 2007, 102) (Sv-ṭ I 70,²⁹⁻³⁰-71,¹⁻³). The Mingun Jetavana’s goal here is to furnish such a “business contract” for the validity of the Mil so that he can begin his task of commenting on the text as a full-fledged member of the Suttapiṭaka.

3.3 *Pada* (Word)

Next in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*’s list of six commentarial strategies is *padato* (“according to the word”) (hereafter *pada*), which on a basic level refers to “the commentarial procedure of explaining the words serially in the order of the sutta” (Bond 1982, 153), meaning words are “picked up” one by one as they appear in the text and defined according to the strategies described below. In this sense, *pada* is not a method of definition *per se*, but the basis on which other forms of definition operate, namely, word by word. This strategy does not compel the

¹¹⁸ *Kāladadesakavatthudhammapaṭiggāhakapaṭibaddhā hi desanā ciraṭṭhitikā hoti, asammosadhammā saddheyyā ca. Desakālakattusotunimittehi upanibandho viya vohāravnicchayo* (Sv-ṭ I 70,²⁹⁻³⁰-71,¹⁻³)

author to comment on every single word in the root text, however, since there are several subcategories of *pada*. There is, for instance, a principle called “commenting on words not previously” explained (P. *apubbapadavaṇṇanā*), such that words, when commented on once, will not be reexplained as they reappear later in the text. Another principle is “(only) explaining doubtful words” (P. *anuttānapadavaṇṇanā*) (von Hinüber 2000, 106), with some commentaries dedicating themselves solely to the explication of obscure or hard to understand terms, such as the *gaṇṭhipadas*, literally exegeses on “knotty words.” In terms of these distinct types of *pada* techniques, Bond explains that the

principle governing the selection of terms for comment is usually set out at the beginning of the commentary upon each sutta. Thus we find ‘*Tatrāyaṃ anuttānapada-vaṇṇanā*,’ ‘Here follows a commentary on unclear (unexplained) words’ (D.A. 741) and ‘*Tatrāyaṃ anupubba-pada-vaṇṇanā*,’ ‘Here follows a consecutive word-commentary’ (D.A. 741) or ‘*Tatrāyaṃ apubba-pada-vaṇṇanā*,’ ‘Here follows a commentary on words which have not occurred before’ (D.A. 807). (Bond 1982, 139)

While the Mingun Jetavana does not stipulate the nature of his use of the *pada* strategy in the same way, he does use boldface in the Burmese script version of his text to indicate to the reader which word is being explained, a strategy he exercises in his *vinicchaya* (judgement) texts as well. Aside from boldface, the *pada* strategy is indicated by the presence of the direct speech or word-reference marker *iti* (or *ti*) after the element in question. Kieffer-Pülz points out that in addition to “indeclinable[s] like *evaṃ* ‘in that way’, *iti/ti* ‘thus’, *ettha* ‘here’, *tattha* ‘there’, *tena/tato/tasma* ‘therefore’, etc.,” a commentary “may contain a verb of saying (*āha*, *avoca*, *vadanti*) or writing (*likhanti*), it may indicate the name of the author or the source, or the generic name of the source (*aṭṭhakathā*, *gaṇṭhipada*, *ṭīkā*, etc.)” (Kieffer-Pülz 2014, 431). While the Mingun Jetavana’s default is to simply use the indeclinable *ti* on its own, he makes use of a full range of commentarial phrases to introduce and explain the root material, including “it has been pointed out in the meaning” (P. *ti atthe pavatto*), “by this word it is understood” (P. *ti padena*

gahitāni), “this is one aspect of the meaning” (P. *ti atthe pavatto eko*), or “one word according to the characteristics of the subject under discussion” (P. *ti ekam padaṃ pi visayaṭṭhānānurūpaṃ*), which means something more like “in conformity with the cause of the definition” (see below). Kieffer-Pülz (2014) has begun to analyse the diverse commentarial idioms used across historical types of exegesis to manage and marshal material quoted either from the root being explained or the invocation of passages from other authoritative texts, and it is likely that given his familiarity with not only *aṭṭhakathās* but *ṭīkās*, *dīpanīs*, *nissayas*, and other forms of widespread or regional exegetical material in Pali and Burmese, the Mingun Jetavana was influenced by a wide variety of sources in his style and phrasing of the *pada* technique.

It is not entirely correct to say that the *pada* strategy is absent of any definitional import itself, however, because another aspect of this method is to define the type of word being commented on. This categorical function of *pada* is referenced by the Cūḷabhayatthera in his *Milinda-ṭīkā*, when he explains that “a word is fourfold on account of prefix, indeclinable particle, noun, predicate”¹¹⁹ (Mil-ṭ 2,¹²⁻¹³). Such classifications are the standard categories of Pali grammar and in this sense, *pada* is more of a syntactical rather than semantic analysis. The Cūḷabhayatthera then goes on to break down these categories even further: “Of these [categories],” he writes, “a noun is fourfold on account of a name given by general consent, a word describing a quality, an artificial name, and a naturally given name”¹²⁰ (Mil-ṭ 2,¹⁴⁻¹⁵). For these, the Cūḷabhayatthera gives stock examples, such as the name of the first legendary king of the present age, Mahāsammata, standing in for “a name given by general consent,” since his title

¹¹⁹ *padan ti upasagga-nid(p)āta-nāma-ākhyātapadavasena catubbidhaṃ* (Mil-ṭ 2,¹²⁻¹³)

¹²⁰ *tesu nā[ma]padaṃ sāmāñña-guṇa-kittima-opapāṭikanāma-vasena-catubbidhaṃ* (Mil-ṭ 2,¹⁴⁻¹⁵)

literally means “the great [one] who was agreed upon,” chosen as he was by the people to govern them (DPPN, s.v. *mahāsammata*). It was already shown above how Buddhaghosa deploys the *pada* strategy in the *Dīghanikāya-aṭṭhakathā* when he explained that the word “thus” (P. *evaṃ*) in the *nidāna* formula spoken by Ānanda “thus has it been heard by me” (*evaṃ me sutam*) is an indeclinable (*evan ti nipāta padam*) (Sv I 26,¹⁰). Buddhaghosa goes on to explain that words like “by me” (P. *me*) in the same formula are “pronouns” (P. *nāmapadāni*), and that in the Pali phrase *paṭipanno hoti*, *paṭi* is a verbal prefix and *hoti* is a verb¹²¹ (Sv I 26,¹¹⁻¹²).

Yet for Buddhaghosa, this kind of technique does not belong to *pada* proper, but “should be known as word analysis” (P. *padavibhāgo veditabbo*) (Sv I 26,¹²⁻¹³), the third strategy mentioned in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*’s sixfold list. Indeed, the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* itself does not provide a proper definition of *pada* but appears to transition straight from an explanation of *sambandha* to *padavibhāga* (word analysis), or rather, glosses over *pada* as being part of both. This glossing is not surprising, however, since the *pada* strategy is in a sense so basic for commentary that it does not need comment, or better said, is so ubiquitous such that it cannot be explained in isolation. In fact, in his *Nettipakaraṇa-aṭṭhakathā*, the third list supplied by Dhammapāla on the techniques of a commentary is identical to that found in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* but omits *pada* with only five members (Kieffer-Pülz 2013, Teil 1:88). Kieffer-Pülz surmises that the copyist of the manuscript considered *pada* a “dittography” and left it out as a result (Kieffer-Pülz 2013, Teil 1:88), which seems reasonable given the similarity between this strategy and the following, *padavibhāga*. Whatever the reason for this omission, it is clear

¹²¹ *paṭīti upasagga-padam*, *hotīti ākkhyāta-padan ti* (Sv I 26,¹¹⁻¹²)

that there was some overlap and even ambiguity between the role of *pada* and *padavibhāga* in the multiple accounts of commentarial methods.

3.4 *Padavibhāga* (Word Analysis)

In the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*, Dhammapāla tries to explain or even correct Buddhaghosa's ambiguation between *pada* and *padavibhāga* as follows:

Padavibhāga means the distinction of the word, but it is not word resolution (*padaviggaha*). And yet, it is said according to the sounds of word analysis and from the resolution of words by words according to [the principle] of having a single remainder (*ekasesavasena*), that *padavibhāga* is words [combined with] word analysis, or that *padavibhāga* is word resolution (*padaviggaha*) [combined with] word analysis, [this is how] it should be understood.¹²² (Sv-ṭ I 43,¹⁷⁻²¹)

The first sentence here is referring to Buddhaghosa's comment above in the *Dīghanikāya-atṭhakathā*, that one is engaging in *padavibhāga* proper only in the act of stipulating the distinction (P. *visesa*) of words (that is, whether the word in question is an indeclinable, verb, noun, etc.). Departing from Buddhaghosa's exclusive definition in the second sentence, Dhammapāla entertains another possibility in his explanation above, adding that the term *padavibhāga* can have two interpretations: it can be considered the combination of words (P. *padāni*), meaning the *pada* strategy of categorical distinction described earlier, and word analysis, or alternately, it can be considered the combination of word analysis and word resolution (P. *padaviggaha*). He prefaces this distinction by clarifying that the resolution of words by words (P. *padapadaviggaha*) is accomplished according to the principle of "having one

¹²² *Padavibhāgo ti padānaṃ viseso, na pana padaviggaho. atha vā padāni ca padavibhāgo ca padavibhāgo; padaviggaho ca padavibhāgo ca padavibhāgo ti vā ekasesavasena padapadaviggahāpi padavibhāga saddena vuttā ti vedittabbaṃ* (Sv-ṭ I 43,¹⁷⁻²¹)

remainder” (P. *ekasesavasena*), the “*pluriel d’ellipse*” also found in Pāṇinian grammar and explicitly associated with both *padaviggaha* and *padavibhāga* in the *Sumangalavilāsinī-ṭikā* and the *Saddanīti* grammar (CPD, s.v. *ekasesa*). Monier Monier-Williams defines the Sanskrit cognate *ekaśeṣa*, following Pāṇini, as “a term denoting that of two or more stems (alike in form and followed by the same termination) only one remains (e.g. the pl. *vṛikṣās* is the only remainder of *vṛikṣas + vṛikṣas + vṛikṣas + ...*)” (MW, s.v. *ekaśeṣa*).

The Mingun Jetavana too was aware of this principle, making use of it in his commentary. For example, when explaining the 19 branches of knowledge Milinda is said to have mastered, he focuses on the word “history” (P. *itihāsa*). In a rather technical passage, the Mingun Jetavana states that the term “‘history’ means ‘he spoke thus, he spoke thus,’ [where] this [original] form (*ayaṃ ākāro*) comes to be lost, [and] here, through the method of having one remainder (*ekasesanayena*), [what] should be spoken as ‘*itihitihāsa*’ is said as ‘*itihāsa*’. This is the science of history.”¹²³ The Mingun Jetavana is making several points in this brief explanation, first stressing that the original form of “thus he said” (*iti āha*) “comes to be lost” (*asati bhavati*), such that the verb “said” (*āha*) becomes “was” (*āsa*), which aligns with Monier-Williams’ Sanskrit definition of *itihāsa* as *iti + ha + āsa*, or “so indeed it was” (MW, s.v. *itihāsa*). Finally, “through the method of elision” (*ekasesanayena*), where “many identical forms are reduced to a

¹²³ *itihāsā ti iti āha, iti āhā ti ayaṃ ākāro asati bhavati etihā itihitihāsā ti vattabbe ekasesanayena itihāsā ti vuccati/ itihāsasattham* (Mil-a 12,^{34-35-13,1}). The translation of *asati bhavati* as “comes to be lost” is a figurative rendering, for literally it should be “comes to not exist.” It could also be translated as “comes to be forgotten,” if one takes the definition of *asati* found in the CPD as an adjective meaning “forgetful” (CPD, s.v. *asati*).

single one” (Deokar 2008, 306), the repetition of the second *iti ha* is eliminated, such that the form finally becomes *itihāsa*.¹²⁴

Technical and terse, this sort of explanation exemplifies one aspect of Dhammapāla’s resolution of words by words (P. *padapadaviggaha*) found in the Mil-a, but there are more applications of this strategy. Another aspect of the application of *ekasesa* deals specifically with compounds. *Ekaśeṣa* formations in Sanskrit, explain Gary Tubb and Emery Boose, are “those in which one noun is used in the dual or plural to stand for more than one noun of identical form but different signification,” such as when the combination of mother (*mātā*) and father (*pitā*) is given as the dual *pitarau* to mean ‘parents’ (Tubb and Boose 2007, 147). Without the dual gender, such *ekaśeṣa* formations seem not as much a concern for Pali grammarians and commentators, but the relevant point here is that the resolution of words (P. *padaviggaha*) has to do with the analysis of compounds. This sense is exactly what Dhammapāla invokes at the end of his explanation of *padavibhāga* above, when he writes that “in this connection, *padavibhāga* should be seen in terms of the words in compounds (*samāsapadesu*), [as per the example] ‘the assembly of monks’ (*bhikkūnaṃ saṅgho*) and so on”¹²⁵ (Sv-ṭ I 43,²¹⁻²²). The word being analysed here, *bhikkhu-saṅgha*, is a dependent determinative compound (P. *tappurisa*, S. *tatpuruṣa*) and in the form as it appears in the root text, the case relationship between the elements of the compound is not stipulated. Dhammapāla, however, makes it clear that the compound consists of two elements, *bhikkhu* and *saṅgha*, and that the word *bhikkhu* (monk) stands in a genitive plural relationship to *saṅgha* (hence the genitive plural form, *bhikkhūnaṃ*), such that the compound

¹²⁴ I must thank Bryan Levman for helping me make sense of this sentence and the complex grammatical moves being glossed over by the Mingun Jetavana here.

¹²⁵ *tattha padavibhāgo: bhikkhūnaṃ saṅgho ti ādi samāsapadesu daṭṭhabbo* (Sv-ṭ I 43,²¹⁻²²)

should be read as the “assembly of monks.”¹²⁶ Examples of this same kind of compound analysis in the Mil-a were seen in the last chapter, while the Cūḷabhayātthera takes this type of analysis to be the very definition of word resolution in his *Milinda-ṭīkā*. When giving examples of *padaviggaha* in the opening of his subcommentary, he explains that “the resolution [of compounds] into their elements should thus be understood [...]. *Abhidhammavinayogāḷhā* is absorption with the meaning of entering into the Abhidhamma and Vinaya (*abhidhamma-vinayesu anupavisanatthena ogāḷhā*). *Suttajālasamatthitā* is the unravelling of the net of suttas (*suttajālassa samatthitā*), and *kaṅkhāṭhānavidālanā* is the bursting of doubtings, [or bursting] doubt, doubtings, and of doubtings. This is the resolution [of words]¹²⁷ (Mil-ṭ 3,⁹⁻¹⁵). Like Dhammapāla in the example of *bhikkhusaṅgha*, the Cūḷabhayātthera is explaining the case relationships and other points of syntax between the elements of compounds found in the opening verse section of the Mil, exemplifying arguably the most common way to understand the function of *padavibhāga*.

Returning to Dhammapāla’s explanation of the two different interpretations of *padavibhāga* above, it should be recalled that he makes this distinction not only according to the principle of ellipsis (P. *ekasesa*, S. *ekaśeṣa*), but also “according to the sound of word analysis” (P. *padavibhāgasaddena*). The Mingun Jetavana also invokes this idea of sound to begin a lengthy explanation of his own use of the *padavibhāga* strategy in the Mil-a, though he uses the

¹²⁶ Such explanations might seem obvious enough, but there are examples where important philosophical discussions can turn on the analysis of a compound as either dependent determinative compounds (P. *tappurisa-samāsa*, S. *atpuruṣa-samāsa*) (and if so, what is the oblique case governing the relationship between the different words), or whether a compound is a possessive, exocentric, attributive compound (P. *bahubbīhi-samāsa*, S. *bahuvrihi-samāsa*). These kinds of compound analyses are especially critical in Sanskrit Abhidharma debates.

¹²⁷ *viggaho pana evaṃ veditabbo [...] abhidhamma-vinayesu anupavisanatthena ogāḷhā abhidhamma-vinay’ ogāḷhā / Suttajālassa samatthitā suttajālasamatthitā-kaṅkhā ca kaṅkhāṭhānaṃ ca kaṅkhāṭhānāni, kaṅkhāṭhānaṃ vidālanāṃ kaṅkhāṭhānavidālanā / ayaṃ viggaho* (Mil-ṭ 3,⁹⁻¹⁵).

term *viggahapadam* (words that are analysed) instead. While discussing the elements of a root text that should be explained by commentators, the Mingun Jetavana singles out “obscure word[s]” (P. *gaṇṭhipadam*) and “word meaning” (P. *atthapadam*) (Mil-a 11,³²). About the former, he writes that “there are obscure word[s] (*gaṇṭhipadam*) that are difficult to understand on account of sound (*saddavasena*). Whichever word is difficult to understand on account of sound,¹²⁸ such a word should be meticulously analysed according to [its] sound.”¹²⁹ Going on to explain what he means about analysing obscure words and word meaning, the Mingun Jetavana seems to be invoking not so much an ontological sense of *sadda*, but a grammatical one, emphasising that their

characteristic[s] should be known. The characteristic of euphonic combination (*sandhilakkhaṇam*), the characteristic of nouns (*nāmalakkhaṇam*), the characteristic of syntax (*kāraḷakkhaṇam*), the characteristic of compounds (*samāsalakkhaṇam*), the characteristic of secondary derivation (*taddhitalakkhaṇam*), the characteristic of verbs (*ākhyātalakkhaṇam*), the characteristic of verbal noun suffixes (*kitalakkhaṇam*). Whichever word corresponds to whichever characteristic, this and that word should be meticulously analysed according to this and that characteristic.¹³⁰

Though the commentator appears to be discussing both obscure words and word meaning, one can find in this quote the various senses of *padavibhāga* discussed above. Further demonstrating the overlap between *pada* and *padavibhāga*, the Mingun Jetavana states that obscure words should be known according to the characteristic of nouns (P. *nāmalakkhaṇam*) (such as those

¹²⁸ Speaking about Pali grammars much later than the *aṭṭhakathās*, specifically the *Kaccāyanasuttaniddesa* from “the fifteenth century A.D” (Ruiz-Falqués 2014, 393), Ruiz-Falqués clarifies that “the word *sadda* literally means ‘sound’ (or even ‘noise’), and only by extension does it mean ‘speech-sound,’ ‘word.’ [...] The Pāli equivalent of ‘word’ is normally *pada*. Unlike *pada*, which is a linguistic category, *sadda* is in Theravāda Buddhism an ontological category: it is the object of the sense faculty of hearing” (Ruiz-Falqués 2015, 45).

¹²⁹ *gaṇṭhipadam pana saddavasena dubbhiṇṇeyyam/ yaṃ yaṃ padam saddavasena dubbhiṇṇeyyam/ taṃ taṃ padam saddavasena vibhajetabbam* (Mil-a 11,³²⁻³⁴)

¹³⁰ *lakkhaṇam jānitabbam/ sandhilakkhaṇam/ nāmalakkhaṇam/ kāraḷakkhaṇam/ samāsalakkhaṇam/ taddhitalakkhaṇam/ ākhyātalakkhaṇam/ kitalakkhaṇam/ yaṃ yaṃ padam yena yena lakkhaṇena sameti/ taṃ taṃ padam tena tena lakkhaṇena vibhajetabbam* (Mil-a 12,¹⁻⁵)

different types mentioned by the Cūḷabhayatthera, viz., names given by general consent, a word describing a quality etc.), the characteristic of verbs (P. *ākhyātalakkhaṇaṃ*) (such as their tense, mood, number etc.), the characteristic of verbal noun suffixes (P. *kitalakkhaṇaṃ*), and the characteristic of secondary derivation (P. *taddhitalakkhaṇaṃ*). In terms of the second sense of *padavibhāga* discussed above, the Mingun Jetavana mentions the characteristic of compounds (P. *samāsalakkhaṇaṃ*), presumably meaning identifying the type of compound, the different elements, and the nature of the relationship between such elements. There are, however, some additional ideas found in this quote, like knowing obscure words and word meanings according to the characteristic of euphonic combination (P. *sandhilakkhaṇaṃ*) and the characteristic of syntax (P. *karakalakkhaṇaṃ*).¹³¹ The key to understanding these categories is to recognise that in “[s]pecifying a category’s characteristic (*lakkhaṇa*),” the Mingun Jetavana is taking part in “a standard fourfold definitional procedure in Pali scholasticism: the others include specifying its function (*rasa*), manifestation (*paccupaṭṭhāna*), and proximate cause (*padatthāna*)” (Heim 2018b, 169). When specifying a category’s characteristic, or in this case, a specific word’s or compound’s characteristic, the Mingun Jetavana is stipulating the features a word or compound shares in common with other words or compounds of the same type, that is, to which category it belongs in terms of the subgroups of a noun, a verb, or compound, and how these different categories overlap with one another and exclude other possibilities.

Hence when taken together, these various characteristics indicate that perhaps more than any other item in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*’s sixfold list of commentarial strategies, *padavibhāga*

¹³¹ In using the idea of “characteristic” in this passage, the Mingun Jetavana is invoking “a standard fourfold definitional procedure in Pali scholasticism,” which along with pointing out a word’s or concept’s characteristic, “include specifying its function (*rasa*), manifestation (*paccupaṭṭhāna*), and proximate cause (*padatthāna*)” (Heim 2018b, 169).

operates within the realm of grammar, for it is the act of recognising the various grammatical categories and elements of words, whether isolated or as part of a compound, and using such categories and elements to explicate the meaning of the word or passage in question.¹³² De Silva says much the same about *padavibhāga* in her introduction to the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*, writing that “[g]rammatical, philological and syntactical evaluation of words is included under this heading. As grammar is indispensable for the correct understanding and interpretation of subject-matter, *padavibhāga* forms an important aspect of the commentarial technique” (De Silva 1970, lxvii). These characteristics mentioned by the Mingun Jetavana also resemble the way *padavibhāga* is meant to function according to the Sanskrit *Nyāyakośa*, where the third item in its list of commentarial strategies is *vigraha*, the Sanskrit cognate of the second element in the compound *padaviggaha* (Tubb and Boose 2007, 3). Tubb and Boose translate *vigraha* as the “[a]nalysis of grammatical complexes (i.e., of nominal compounds and of derivative stems)” (Tubb and Boose 2007, 4), stressing that it “is in the analysis of complex formations that the role of Pāṇinian grammar becomes most visible” (Tubb and Boose 2007, 12). The grammatical thrust of *padavibhāga* is only half the story, however, since it is in essence bridging the gap between grammar and meaning. Put another way, this commentarial strategy unites the syntactical and semantical roles of a commentary, since the two work in tandem to render any word or sentence intelligible. A commentator does not simply give the grammar of a word for its own sake, like one might find in Pāṇini, but to arrive at a better understanding of the meaning of a word and its

¹³² According to Bode, the royal preceptor of King Siripavaramahādhammarājā, named Nāṇa or Nāṇālamkāra, composed a grammatical work called *Padavibhāga* “in the first year of his monastic life” (1909, 71), which could shed more light on how this commentarial strategy was understood in second-millennium Southeast Asia. It is likely that Nāṇālamkāra’s use of the term would have been influenced by the grammatical tradition since the *aṭṭhakathās* had been composed, with Gornall explaining that “Vimalabuddhi’s application of the principle of ‘word analysis’ (*padaviggaha/padavibhāga*),” the author of the *Mukhamattadīpanī*, “is innovative in that he uses it to refer to any form of grammatical analysis, including semantic analysis, and not only as the parsing of compounds” (2020, 113).

role within the text, textual corpus, and doctrinal system as a whole. In this sense, there is a close connection between *padavibhāga* and the strategy known as *pad'atthato* (according to the meaning of a word) (hereafter *pad'attha*). Highlighting the connection between *padavibhāga* and *pad'attha*, Tubb and Boose explain that the latter commentarial strategy, “that of explaining the meaning of the individual word, is accomplished partly by giving synonyms, partly by quoting dictionaries, and partly by performing the third service, that of analyzing complex formations [*vigraha*]” (Tubb and Boose 2007, 12). Making the same link, Gornall emphasizes that there is a “general approach of the other early commentaries, traditionally ascribed to Buddhaghosa, that treat scriptural meaning (*attha*) as rich and expansive but never as detached from or as more important than scripture’s phrasing (*vyañjana*)” (Gornall 2020, 109), meaning that the two can be distinguished in theory but never separated in practice. As such, coming in the middle of the sixfold list, *padavibhāga* and *pad'attha* together anchor the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*’s methodology, for it is precisely their interplay that renders a word or phrase intelligible and meaningful to the reader.

3.5 *Pad'attha* (Meaning of a Word)

Clarifying the meaning of a word or phrase is perhaps the primary purpose of exegesis, leading De Silva to call *pad'attha* “by far the most important task of the commentaries” (De Silva 1970, lxvii).¹³³ Given this prominent place of the *pad'attha* strategy in the commentarial project,

¹³³ Clarifying the meaning of a word is not, of course, limited to the commentaries, with many examples found in the Sutta-piṭaka itself. For instance, Norman claims that the “earliest Theravādin commentarial text is one which is actually given separate canonical status. It is the Niddesa, a commentary upon two *vaggas* [(chapters)] and one *sutta* of the Sutta-nipāta. Here again we find a great deal of explanation by means of synonyms” (Norman [1992] 2012, 150).

several methods have been developed to carry out this task. In his *Vyākhyāyukti*, Vasubandhu “advocates the use of four tools: synonyms (*rnam grangs*, **paryāya*), distinguishing characteristics (*mtshan nyid*, **lakṣaṇa*), etymological explanations (*nges pa 'i tshig*, **nirukti*), and analyses (*rab tu dbye ba*, **prabheda*)” (Nance 2012b, 116). Reinforcing the overlap between *padavibhāga* and *pad'attha* mentioned in the last section, the concept of characteristic (P. *lakkhāṇa*, S. *lakṣaṇa*) is also found here, just as it was in the above quote from the Mil-a, where the Mingun Jetavana marks out word meaning (P. *atthapadam*) as one element of a root text that needs to be explained along with obscure words. While I interpreted this discussion on characteristics as referencing *padavibhāga*, the difference between this commentarial strategy and *pad'attha* is one of generality versus particularity. For while obscure words should be analysed according to their sound (P. *sadda*), the reader of the Mil-a is told that “there are words difficult to understand according to [their] particular nature (*sabhāvavasena*); whichever word is difficult to understand according to [its] particular nature, such a word should be meticulously analysed according to [its] meaning.”¹³⁴ With this framing, if one analyses a word according to its sound, such as euphonic combination or compounds, then it is within the realm of *padavibhāga*, but if one analyses a word according to the concept of particular nature (P. *sabhāva*), then it is within the realm of *pad'attha*.¹³⁵

Though the Mingun Jetavana does not explain what exactly he means by the “particular nature” of a word, it appears he is invoking “specific definitional practices developed by the

¹³⁴ *atthapadam pana sabhāvavasena dubbhiññeyyam/ yaṃ yaṃ padam sabhāvavasena dubbhiññeyyam taṃ taṃ padam atthavasena vibhajetabbam* (Mil-a 11,^{34-35-12,1})

¹³⁵ The concept of *sabhāva* appears in the Mil 20 times, but as Noa Ronkin explains, the use of this term “is heterogenous and accommodates various senses,” all of which show little “interest in the ontological status of the *dhammas*,” the characteristic application of this term in the Abhidhammapīṭaka (Ronkin 2005, 107).

Abhidhamma commentaries” (Heim 2018b, 169). Yet rather than referring to some kind of ontological entity or trait *sensu* Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma,¹³⁶ Heim argues that “*sabhāva* need be nothing more than the distinctive character, particularity, or ‘own way of being’ of a *dhamma* or other category of analysis” (Heim 2018b, 169). According to this reading, a *sabhāva* is a type of characteristic, but is opposite to the kinds of characteristics mentioned by the Mingun Jetavana above that I interpreted as falling under *padavibhāga*, for rather than being a characteristic that a word or phrase shares with other words or phrases, such as broad grammatical categories, a *sabhāva* is precisely the characteristic that singles out the word or phrase being defined; it is in fact that very feature or attribute which is shared with no other.¹³⁷ After discussing the multiple characteristics outlined above, such as of nouns, verbs, suffixes and so on, the Mingun Jetavana appears to describe how one can go about discovering the *sabhāva* of a word:

Indeed, a word should be known by speaking about the elements (*viggahaṃ*) of that word. There are word[s] analysed according to themselves; there are word[s] analysed not according to themselves. The cause (*nimitta*) should be known. The cause [should be known] just so! The cause as manifested (*pavattinimittam*). Whichever cause, in whatever word it appears, by this or that cause, of this or that word, the analysis (*viggaho*) of the word[s] should be told.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ In this assessment, Heim disagrees with Ronkin, who interprets this use of *sabhāva* in the *aṭṭhakathās* as indicating an ontological, rather than epistemological, orientation, though admittedly, an ontology that resides somewhere “between the realms of psychology, soteriology, and language” (Ronkin 2005, 122). According to Ronkin, it was in the *aṭṭhakathās*, especially on the Abhidhammapiṭaka, that “the developed *dhamma* theory and the doctrine of *sabhāva* emerge as an abstract, atemporal discourse representational of all possible instances of encountered phenomena” (Ronkin 2005, 122). Wishing not to introduce questions of ontology into my discussion on the Mil-a, I have adapted Heim’s translation of *sabhāva* as ‘distinct particularity’ rather than the more philosophical sounding ‘self-nature,’ which recalls the Sarvāstivāda’s ontological connotations of this term.

¹³⁷ Another possibility of understanding *sabhāva* within the context of definitional practices is offered by Gornall, who points out that the “qualification ‘*sabhāva*-’ may also refer to the language’s capacity to capture the essence of reality” (2020, 56). This usage of *sabhāva* does not need to have an overtly ontological sense, but is usually found in discussions of Pali as a *sabhāvanirutti*, a form of “natural expression” or default language that a human would naturally speak if left unexposed to local vernaculars (Gornall 2020, 93, 107).

¹³⁸ *padassa viggahaṃ kathentena hi padaṃ jānitabbam/ saviggahapadam/ asaviggahapadam/ nimittam jānitabbam/ byuppattinimittam/ pavattinimittam/ yaṃ yaṃ nimittam yattha yattha pade dissati/ tena tena nimittena tassa tassa padassa viggaho kathetabbo* (Mil-a 12,⁵⁻⁹)

The first notable point of this passage is that the Mingun Jetavana invokes the word ‘analysis’ (*viggaha*), the same term found in the discussion on *padavibhāga* above, but again, this form of analysis is rooted in the “specific definitional practices developed by the Abhidhamma commentaries” as mentioned by Heim. In a passage that Heim translates from the *Atthasālinī*, the “specific definitional practices” that the Mingun Jetavana appears to be utilizing are described as “an alternative method,” one in which

dhamma refers to cause (*hetu*). For it is said: ‘analysis (*paṭisambhida*) of a *dhamma* is knowledge about a cause.’ Purpose (*attha*) is the result of a cause. For it is said: analysis of purpose is knowledge about a result of a cause. Teaching is making known—the intention is speaking about *dhammas* according to *dhammas*; or else it is speaking [of them]. whether in order or backwards, in brief or in detail, et cetera. (As trans. Heim 2018a, 250)

In finishing this paragraph, the *Atthasālinī* claims that the “penetration” of a given *dhamma* is to be accomplished by describing both “its distinct particularity (*sabhāva*) and naming its characteristic (*lakkaṇa*)” (As trans. Heim 2018a, 250), demonstrating how important it is that these two methods are deployed in unison. Though the exact Pali terms are different, crucial similarities can be recognised in the passages from the Mil-a and the *Atthasālinī*, first in the emphasis on analysis, here in reference to *dhammas*, and for the Mingun Jetavana, in reference to words in the root text. The analysis of *dhammas* in the *Atthasālinī* is to occur according to *dhammas*, which mirrors the Mingun Jetavana’s emphasis on analyzing words according to words. The second similarity is the idea in the *Atthasālinī* that analyzing a *dhamma* is having knowledge about its cause, which is paralleled by the Mingun Jetavana’s use of the word *nimitta*. *Nimitta* can have many distinct and specialised meanings, translated most often as either “sign” or “cause.” Vasubandhu again provides a clue as to what a Buddhist commentator like the Mingun Jetavana might mean by using *nimitta* in the context of explaining a word, for according to Nance, Vasubandhu’s explanation of “the first three tools [for explaining word meaning] is

explicitly stated to involve names (*ming*, **nāman*): synonyms are said to consist in ‘other names’ (*ming gzhan*, **paranāman*), and definitions offer ‘the name that pertains to an object’ (*don gang la ming de yod pa*, **yadarthe tannāmabhāva*), whereas etymological explanation treats ‘the cause (sign) of names’ (*ming gi rgyu mtshan*, **nāmanimitta*)” (Nance 2012b, 116). It is the third element that is critical for this discussion, for Vasubandhu links etymology with the “sign” or “cause of names” (S./P. *nāmanimitta*), using the same term, *nimitta*, in a similar context as the Mingun Jetavana does in the Mil-a. In this sense, one may take *nimitta* not as an exact synonym to *hetu* as found in the *Atthasālinī*, but as having a similar function in terms of the definitional practices being here described.

In a passage 146 pages later in the Mil-a, the Mingun Jetavana appears to offer the reader one of many examples of explaining the meaning of a word according to its particular nature, or rather, according to its cause (P. *nimitta*). In the root text, Milinda asks Nāgasena about the apparent contradiction of honouring the Buddha after he has fully passed away into *parinibbāna*, lamenting that according to “the leaders of other sects” (P. *titthiyā*),

if the Buddha accepts gifts he cannot have passed entirely away. He must be still in union with the world, having his being somewhere in it, in the world, a shareholder in the things of the world; and therefore any honour paid to him becomes empty and vain. On the other hand, if he be entirely passed away (from life), unattached to the world, escaped from all existence, then honours would not be offered to him. For he who is entirely set free accepts no honour, and any act done to him who accepts it not becomes empty and vain.¹³⁹ (Mil trans. Rhys Davids 1890b, I:144–45)

The dilemma here is that only if the Buddha has not fully passed away can he reward the veneration (P. *pūjā*) of his followers, but then his reward is useless, as he is still connected to the

¹³⁹ *yadi buddho pūjaṃ sādīyati na parinibbuto buddhom saṃyutto lokena antobhaviko lokasmiṃ lokasādhāraṇo, tasmā tassa kato adhikāro vañjho bhavati aphaḷo; yadi parinibbuto, visamṃyutto lokena nissaṭṭo sabbabhavehi, tassa pūjā na uppajjati, parinibbuto na kiñci sādīyati, asādīyantassa kato adhikāro vañjho bhavati aphaḷo ti* (Mil 95,¹⁰⁻¹⁶)

world and not fully enlightened; if, on the other hand, the Buddha has fully passed away into *parinibbāna*, he does deserve being venerated, but cannot possibly reward it, having transcended the world and any action stemming therefrom. For the Mingun Jetavana, the concern is explaining the phrase, “become empty [and] vain” (P. *vañjho bhavati aphalo*) that describes veneration of the Buddha, the negative consequence arising from both sides of the dilemma. More precisely, he is interested in explaining the meaning of the word *vañjha*, an adjective meaning “barren” or “barren woman” when taken as a feminine noun. To do so, the Mingun Jetavana invokes the idea of explicating the word according to *visayaṭṭhānānurūpaṃ*, which I translate as “in conformity with the cause of the definition.”¹⁴⁰

‘*vañjho bhavati aphalo*’ here means ‘barren,’ [while the] meaning of this word should be analyzed in conformity with (*anūrūpaṃ*) the cause (*ṭhāna*) of the definition (*visaya*). What then is that in conformity with the cause of the definition? This one word, ‘barren women,’ [has] also [to be analysed] in conformity with the cause of the definition. This one sentence: ‘a barren one becomes fruitless’ is also [to be analysed] in conformity with the cause of the definition. How should this be understood? In the world, indeed it is not said [that] ‘a woman does not possess a womb.’ Then why is it said, ‘a woman is a barren woman’? The woman who has taken on an embryo beforehand, [and] who has not [yet] obtained to term, by the nature of having a disturbance of the womb [when the embryo] is at a tender age, from that it is said ‘this woman is barren.’¹⁴¹

Here the Mingun Jetavana has set up the context of the word “barren” “in the world” (P.

lokasmim), supplying the reader the cause of the definition external to the word itself, namely,

that a woman has had a miscarriage and cannot bring an embryo to term. In this sense, the word

is analysed in terms of the situation to which the word is a referent, namely, the material

¹⁴⁰ In translating *visaya* as ‘definition,’ I am taking both its metaphorical meaning of ‘range’ and ‘scope’ in the sense of connotation or the range of meaning, i.e., a definition, while also following Rhys Davids and William Stede in translating *avisaya* as “indefinable” (PED, s.v. *avisaya*)

¹⁴¹ *vañjho bhavati aphalo ti ettha vañjho ti padassa attho visayaṭṭhānānurūpaṃ vibhajitabbo/ kiṃ pana taṃ visayaṭṭhānānurūpaṃ/ vañjihitthī ti ekaṃ padaṃ pi visayaṭṭhānānurūpaṃ/ vañjho bhavati aptihalo ti idaṃ ekaṃ padaṃ pi visayaṭṭhānānurūpaṃ/ kathaṃ jānitabbaṃ/ lokasmim hi itthī gabbhaṃ aggaṇhanī nāma natthi/ atha kasmā itthī vañjihitthī ti vuttā/ yā itthī puretaraṃ gabbhaṃ gaṇhitvā paripākaṃ appatvā tassa gabbhassa taruṇakāle yeva kupitatā/ tasmā sā itthī vañjihī ti vuttā* (Mil-a 158,¹⁰⁻¹⁸)

condition that there is “a disturbance of the womb while the embryo is developing” (P. *tassa gabbhassa taruṇakāle yeva kupitatā*). Such a disturbance is not inherently contained within the mere sounds or morphology of the word but is in a sense external to the sounds, phonemes, and the combination thereof.

Yet after this first layer of explanation, the Mingun Jetavana does move to connect the external conditions referenced to the “internal” components of the word. He does so by developing a creative etymology around *vañjha*, such that the morphological elements of the descriptor *vañjha* and especially its implicit or putative verb root “naturally” or intrinsically capture the fact of a woman unable to give birth to a child, in this case, a son. The Mingun Jetavana writes that

In the passage handed down [it says] ‘the barren women’ [where] there in the word, ‘barren’ (*vañjha*) the letter ‘va’ (*vakāro*) [means] son, thus it is pointed out in the meaning. Therefore, indeed, the meaning of the word ‘*vañjho*’ should be analysed in conformity with the cause of the definition, [such] that [the syllable] *jho* [represents] her son who has been lost. Because the meaning of such a woman is not that there is a child [who] exists. From that, when it is said ‘this woman has lost a son (*va-jhā*),’ she is called ‘a barren woman’ (*vañjhā*) as a form of abuse. ‘A barren one is without fruit,’ [this is said] in the passages handed down, [where] ‘barren’ means in this line here ‘making fruit,’ [as] pointed out in the meaning. By that, the meaning of that one [who] is ‘barren’ is: ‘your son does not exist,’ ‘*jho*,’ [such is how] the meaning of the word ‘*vañjha*’ should be analysed in conformity with the cause of the definition. Because the word contains [the element] ‘lost,’ which is fruit, therefore, when one says ‘*vañjho*,’ one is saying ‘barren’ as a form of rebuke. It should be known just so in conformity with the cause of the definition.¹⁴²

This explanation is a complicated but clear example of the *nirutti* (S. *nirukti*) method being employed by the Mingun Jetavana, a creative etymology that seeks to explain the descriptor

¹⁴² *tathā ca sati vañjhī ti āgataṭṭhāne vañjhā ti tattha pade vakāro putto ti atthe pavatto/ tena vo putto jho naṭṭho etissā ti vañjhā ti vacanattho visayaṭṭhānānurūpaṃ vibhajetabbo/ yasmā etissā itthiyā naṭṭho putto atthi/ tasmā sā itthī vajhā ti vattabbe niggahitāgamavasena vañjhā ti vuccati/ vañjho bhavati aphalo ti āgataṭṭhāne vañjho ti ettha pade vakāro phalo ti atthe pavatto/ tena vo phalo jho¹⁴² naṭṭho etassā ti vañjho ti vacanattho visayaṭṭhānānurūpaṃ vibhajetabbo/ yasmā etassa adhikārassa naṭṭho phalo atthi/ tasmā so adhikāro vajho ti vattabbe niggahitāgamavasena vañjho ti vuccati/ evametam visayaṭṭhānānurūpaṃ jānitabbam (Mil-a 158,¹⁸⁻²⁸)*

vañjha in terms of its real or imagined verbal root. A *nirutti* analysis is performed, according to Eivind Kahrs, to discover “the *tattva* of a word,” its “that-ness” emerging from the connection between the elements of that word, usually an explicit or latent verbal root, and some action, process, or phenomenon operating in the world (Kahrs 1998, 25). Though “found in the canonical texts from an early period,” *nirutti* analyses become a prominent feature of the *aṭṭhakathās* (Norman [1992] 2012, 158) and other forms of commentary, so much so that Aruna K. Gamage states that “the extensive usage of etymology in the *aṭṭhakathā*-s has contributed exceedingly to the development of commentarial literature as a distinctive and authoritative exegetical tradition of Buddhism” (Gamage 2009, 604). Referred to as a form of “folk” or “creative” etymology, a *nirutti* analysis does not function in the historically positive sense of comparative philology but draws on implicit cultural and religious contexts not always contained in the actual morphology of the word. As Norman cautions, a *nirutti* analysis “often resembles folk etymology in its mode of operation, but this is to misunderstand its purpose. Quite frequently words are explained by means of others which are similar in appearance but are, in fact, in no way related to them” (Norman [1992] 2012, 158). It is instead the shared context that makes the connections between words and actions possible, with a word’s verb root or other elements manipulated or reinterpreted to make the connections clear.¹⁴³

Hence, when the Mingun Jetavana claims above that the syllable “*va*” in the word “*vañjha*” refers to a son (P. *putta*), it appears that he is attempting to make a connection between *va* and the Pali word *vana*, meaning forest. The key to understanding the logic of this connection

¹⁴³ As De Silva points out, the *nirutti* also has another, more pragmatic function in that it “helped the preservation of early interpretations against inevitable semasiological changes during the course of time” (1970, lxvii)

is recognising that the commentator is invoking the metaphorical connotation of *vana*, with Rhys Davids and William Stede explaining that in the Pali tradition, forest is given an “allegorical” meaning where jungle is equated with desire (P. *taṇha*) (PED, s.v. *vana*). In this allegorical sense, the word “*vana*” is traced back to the verb root “*van*”, becoming *vanati* or *vanoti*, meaning to desire or to lust, which is also defined with reference to the verb *yācati*, to beg or request (PED, s.v. *vana*). Revealing a possible connection with the lexicographical sources used by the Mingun Jetavana, this same connection between the verbal root “*van*”, a son, and *yācati* is seen in the *Tipiṭaka abhidhān*,¹⁴⁴ where *vañjha* is defined as “desires, begs for a son means a barren woman [where] *jha* is the cause (*vanati yācati puttam ti vañjhā jha paccayam*) (TPMA, s.v. ๐๑). Within this reasoning, the syllable “*va*” stands in for son because a son is what a barren woman utmost desires or requests. Importantly, the word “cause” (P. *paccayam*), a possible synonym for both *hetu* and *nimitta*, is deployed in the definition supplied by the *Tipiṭaka abhidhān* in reference to the second part of the word, *jha*, echoing the language of the Mingun Jetavana used above. The Mingun Jetavana goes on to explain above that the syllable *jha* in *vañjha* means that “the son has perished” (*putto [...] naṭṭho*). Now the verb root for *nassati*, of which *naṭṭha* is a past, passive participle, is *nas* (S. *naś*), which at first glance does not have any obvious connection to *jha*. However, according to Monier-Williams, *jha* is defined in Sanskrit as, among other things, “anything lost or mislaid” (MW, s.v. *jha*), and so it appears that the Mingun Jetavana is picking up on this same association between *jha* and the root Sanskrit root *naś* also maintained somewhere in the Pali tradition.

¹⁴⁴ The *Tipiṭaka abhidhān* actually postdates the Mingun Jetavana and the Mil-a, but the compilers of the former were trained within the same monastic education system as the Mingun Jetavana and they were no doubt drawing from the same sources when defining words, not least of which were the canonical sources themselves.

In this second layer of exegesis of *vañjha*, the Mingun Jetavana deploys a *nirutti* analysis to forge a connection between the elements of the word and the situation to which the word refers out there “in the world” (P. *lokasmim*). In his own explanation of the methodology he is using, “cause” (P. *thāna*) in the compound “in conformity with the cause of the definition” (P. *visayaṭṭhānānurūpaṃ*) appears to be functioning in the same way as *nimitta* used by the Mingun Jetavana above (and by Vasubandhu in his *Vyākhyāyukti*), namely, as the reason or cause of the word itself revealed by the application of a *nirutti* analysis. My interpretation is reinforced by a similar use of another Pali synonym for “cause,” *paccayaṃ*, found in the *Tipiṭaka* abhidhān’s definition of *vañjha* given earlier. Finally, these different synonyms for the word “cause” harken back to the definitional practices of the *Atthasālinī*, where to know a *dhamma* is to know its *hetu*, or cause. To better appreciate how one can define a word by revealing its cause, it is necessary to realise that the word *vañjha* is in fact a name, a name that describes a particular type of individual and its unique characteristics. The nature of a name has been an important point of discussion in Pali commentarial and grammatical texts. In the *Kaccāyanasuttaniddesa*, for example, Chapaṭa Saddhammajotipāla explains that something

is called name because it points towards objects [directly], or because it causes to convey its own meaning. For, when someone sees a particular substance associated with a meaning, it is called name (*nāma*) because it points to (*namati*) the meaning. And when somebody hears a word that is a name, it is called name because it causes to convey (*nāmeti*) the meaning/object.¹⁴⁵ (Kacc-nidd trans. Ruiz-Falqués 2015, 402) (Kacc-nidd 1.1.2)

When understood in this way, the Mingun Jetavana deploys a *nirutti* analysis in an attempt to demonstrate how the name *vañjha* “causes to convey its own meaning” (*attani catthe nāmeti*),

¹⁴⁵ *tattha atthe namati attani catthe nāmetīti vā nāmaṃ. yadā hi atthasaṅkhātāṃ dabbāṃ passati, tadā atthe namatī ti nāmaṃ. yadā nāmasaddaṃ suṇāti, tadā attani atthe nāmetī ti nāmaṃ* (Kacc-nidd 1.1.2)

with the cause being inherent in the verb root and other elements of the word itself. With these inherent elements, the name *vañjha* can be seen as pointing or “bowing” to its own meaning, that is, pointing to a barren woman wishing to have a son. Hence it is through a *nirutti* analysis that the cause of the name is revealed, which is also an example of analysing a word according to the word itself.

What this example thus demonstrates is how central *nirutti* analyses are to the *pad’attha* commentarial technique, but also how such analyses draw from a shared set of assumptions between the reader and commentator, assumptions which can be either general or highly specialized. Bond points to these different shades of shared assumptions when he identifies two types of definition found in the Pali *aṭṭhakathās*, “explanation of the word” (P. *padavaṇṇanā*) and “explanation of the meaning” (P. *atthavaṇṇanā*) (Bond 1982, 146). The first type, that of *padavaṇṇanā*, he calls “general or conventional” where definitions are supplied according to the “conventional or common religious meaning of the word, as it might have been used in almost any religious system in India” (Bond 1982, 146). The example above of *vañjha* can be considered such a definition, since despite the obvious Buddhist undertones, the explanation of “barren” might be applicable to any religious or even vulgar rendering of the word. In contrast, “[t]o define a word under *atthavaṇṇanā*,” explains Bond, “the Commentaries may employ some of these same methods [...] but the difference is that under *atthavaṇṇanā* the Commentaries use these methods to establish the specialized meaning of the word in the context of the *dhamma*” (Bond 1982, 149–50). In this second type of definition, then, the assumptions shared between the commentator and the reader are specifically Buddhist and meant to serve some kind of specialised, soteriological purpose.

An example of this kind of exclusive *nirutti* analysis is found in the first chapter of the Mil-a, when the Mingun Jetavana, explicating the various systems of Vedic knowledge (P. *sattha*, S. *śāstra*) that Milinda was apparently master of (including grammar (P. *vyākaraṇa*) and the *nirutti* method itself)¹⁴⁶, offers creative etymologies of the *āstika* philosophical-schools Sāṃkhya and Vaiśeṣika, glossing the latter as “that which is entered, in this context, the pillar so-named *thambha* that is made with effective requisites of timber, poles and so on.”¹⁴⁷ In the introduction to his transliterated edition of the Mil-a, Deshpande surmises that the Mingun Jetavana must “be unaware that the names *Sāṃkhiyā* and *Vesekā* refer to the systems of Sāṃkhya and Vaiśeṣika, ... [and] offers purely etymological explanations” (Deshpande 1999, 18). This observation may be technically correct, since the Mingun Jetavana is said not to have known Sanskrit, but upon closer examination, it seems he was aware of the religious commitments of these schools as opposed to Buddhist doctrine, at least of Vaiśeṣika. My reason for suggesting as much is that the Pali word for “pillar” the Mingun Jetavana employs here, *esikaṃ*, denotes “a pillar at a city gate, proverbially used as a symbol of stability” (CPD, s.v. *esikaṃ*). By again using a proverbial connotation, the Mingun Jetavana is apparently linking *esikaṃ* with the name Vaiśeṣika, which can be traced to the verb root “*śiṣ*”, to “leave” (Whitney, s.v. *śiṣ*), or rather, to “leave behind” or “remain,” which is emblematic of the Vaiśeṣika school, characterized by its “substantialist, realist ontology” and its doctrine of nine substances, or things that eternally remain (Potter 1977, 1). In this light, the connection between Vaiśeṣika and pillar is critical for the Mingun Jetavana and his audience, since the proverbial meaning of *esikaṃ*

¹⁴⁶ Christian Lammerts points out, there is “some difference among regional traditions of the Mil as to what exactly the list should comprise” (Dietrich Christian Lammerts 2010, 411). For more on his discussion, see Lammerts (2010), 167-169, 411-412.

¹⁴⁷ *visesika ti visiyati thambhasaṅkhātaṃ esikaṃ tulādidabbasambhārehi kariyati etthā* (Mil-a 12,²¹⁻²²)

highlights the substantialist ontology of a school diametrically opposed to the Buddhist doctrine of non-self (P. *anatta*) in this regard. Such a *nirutti* analysis demonstrates how the Mingun Jetavana was not so much concerned with an historical account of schools of philosophy but with rendering terms relevant to his task as a scholar and teacher of Theravada theory and practice. The shared assumption here between the commentator and his readers is thus highly specialised, where the word in question is related “to the Buddha’s teachings, place[d] in the context of the *dhamma* and define[d] [...] in relation to other concepts in the system” (Bond 1982, 146–47), or in this case, defined in opposition to them.

While this discussion on *pad’attha* has only focused on one aspect of a multifaceted commentarial strategy, it has provided further insight into the overlap between *padavibhāga* and *pad’attha*, and by extension, grammar and semantics, in the Pali commentaries. For while both are in essence built on analysis, (P. *vigghaha*), a term the Mingun Jetavana frequently referenced in the excerpt used to open this section, *padavibhāga* is more concerned with the analysis of a word in relation to other words, whether it be in a compound or a sentence, while *pad’attha* is more concerned with the analysis of a word in relation to things, events, or actions in the world, exemplified by creative etymologies, or *niruttis*. This overlap between grammar and semantics was recognized as far back as the time of Yāska, who, according to Kahrs, probably wrote the lexicographical commentary *Nirukta* sometime between “the seventh and third centuries BCE” (Kahrs 1998, 14). In this Sanskrit work, which deploys the *nirukti* method to explain words in the Veda (specifically, the *Nighaṇṭu*, a kind of word index of difficult terms found in the Veda), Yāska “characterise[s] his branch of knowledge (*vidyāsthāna*) as *vyākaraṇasya kārtsnyam svārthasādhakam ca*, ‘a complement to grammar, moreover something which is a means to its own end’ [...], implying thereby that *nirukta* takes care of that part of linguistic analysis which

vyākaraṇa does not cover” (Kahrs 1998, 32). In this sense, *pad’attha* exemplified by *nirutti/nirukti* analysis is rooted in but builds on grammar (P./S. *vyākaraṇa*), represented by *padavibhāga*, but Kahrs suggests that an alternative reading of this phrase can also be made, that “*vyākaraṇasya kārtsnyam* could be taken quite literally as ‘the totality of grammar,’ thus also in this case implying that *nirukta* serves to make grammar complete” (Kahrs 1998, 32). According to this alternative reading, grammatical analysis like the kind seen in the *padavibhāga* commentarial strategy is necessary for exegesis but not sufficient; only when a grammatical analysis is exegetically activated by something like a *nirutti/nirukti* analysis, when it is creatively animated by a commentator who connects the word in question to actions, events, and doctrines within a given social, cultural, or religious system, is the task of the commentator complete, or nearly so.

Within this way of thinking, *pad’attha* should be recognized as the point in the sixfold commentarial strategies where exegesis begins to move beyond the history of the text (*sambandha*), beyond the internal coherence of the words (*pada* and *padavibhāga*), and turns its attention to the world beyond the text—to the social. As Marta Sernesi frames it, “the production of signification does not occur in a void, but within a social space. Hence, it does not depend from the sole intention of the speaker, or from the mechanical functioning of a linguistic system” (Sernesi 2015, 462), such is the kind of analysis characterised by the *pada* and *padavibhāga* strategies. “Instead,” according to Sernesi, “the production of meaning may be seen as arising from a dynamic social process, involving the speaker and the recipient, who both connect the discourse with other discourses produced in the social space, synchronically and diachronically” (Sernesi 2015, 462). Thus, it is in these connections between “the speaker and the recipient,” especially as forged by *nirutti* analyses, that meaning, and exegesis at large, becomes

“intersubjective” (Kahrs 1998, 4), existing between two or more people who form a religious or cultural community across time and space. It is within these communities that commentary ultimately seeks to intervene. In light of such communities, *pad’attha* advances the process seen throughout the sixfold list by setting up the last two strategies found in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*, *anuyogato* (according to questions) (hereafter *anuyoga*) and *parihārato* (according to apologetics) (hereafter *parihāra*), which go further in moving exegesis away from the realm of grammar, even from semantics, and into the arena of dialogue and debate.

3.6 *Anuyoga* (Questions) and *Parihāra* (Apologetics)

The final two commentarial strategies found in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* are *anuyoga* and *parihāra*. *Anuyoga*, which refers to the commentator proactively raising questions or possible doubts about the root text, is also a term from South Asian philosophy meaning “statement” and is only used by Dhammapāla, while the terms *cālanā* or *codanā* are found in other Pali texts (Kieffer-Pülz 2013, Teil 1:94), such as the *Milinda-ṭīkā*. The second term, *parihāra*, meaning “surrounding” or “keeping away” with the figurative sense of circling to attack or avoiding attack oneself (PED, s.v. *parihāra*), is the disarming and resolution of such questions and doubts pre-emptively raised by the commentator under the banner of *anuyoga*. In a word, *parihāra* is apologetics (Endo 2013, 4). Though both *anuyoga* and *parihāra* are listed separately in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*, Aleix Ruiz-Falqués calls these last two strategies “the specific dialectical elements” of the sixfold list (Ruiz-Falqués 2015, 116). Hence their complementary nature means that they are often treated as one (as in Vasubandhu’s *Vyākhyāyukti*), since the purpose of pre-emptively raising questions is ultimately to resolve them, not to leave the root text vulnerable and open to doubt. *Anuyoga* and *parihāra* are, according to Tubb and Boose, “based on the style of oral debate rather than on the

style of oral instruction, so that [they] use a different arsenal of vocabulary, syntax, and organization” (Tubb and Boose 2007, 5). In some cases, the dialogue takes place with a hypothetical opponent, often referenced by anonymous pronouns meaning “some” or “others,” such as “*keci, apare, eke, aññe,*” (Endo 2013, 83),¹⁴⁸ or in the form of a “scholastic discussions between the student (*sissa*), who plays the role of *pūrvapakṣa*, and the teacher (*ācāriya*), who plays the role of *siddhāntin*,” such as in the *Kaccāyanasuttaniddesa* (Ruiz-Falqués 2015, 116). The opponent or student may be outside the religious system being defended, but often they take the form of a sectarian rival dealing with the same basic material.

Perhaps the key function of this pair of strategies is to act in tandem to “show,” in the words of De Silva, “that there are no inner contradictions or inconsistencies among the suttas of the Pali canon” (De Silva 1970, lxix), which can also be said for commentaries on the Vinaya and Abhidhamma. Vasubandhu’s explanation of these two commentarial strategies highlights this particular function. He notes that there are two types of objection that an opponent can raise (or what a commentator can put in the mouth of an opponent): “objection to words (*sgra la brgal ba, *śabdacodya*) and objection to meaning (*don la brgal ba, *arthacodya*)” (Nance 2012b, 118). The first type of objection, which is “pitched at the level of grammatical form,” is an attack not on the substance of the text or its underlying ideas so much as on how those ideas are conveyed through language (Nance 2012b, 118). Such an attack is certainly serious, especially since a Pali commentator would maintain that the words of the Buddha are “beautiful in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end,” perfectly suited and articulated to express the full force

¹⁴⁸ In fact, the analysis of such pronouns is an important method for tracing both the potential foils of views found in the commentaries and the sources such views are based on. For a detailed account of such pronouns in the work of Dhammapāla, see Endo (2013), chapter II, pages 83-106.

of the *dhamma*; yet the second type of objection, that levelled at meaning, is perhaps more fundamental to the commentarial project, since to uncover a contradiction in one aspect of the Buddha’s teachings in terms of meaning is to cast doubt on the Tipiṭaka as a whole. Vasubandhu goes on to identify two types of contradictions that can arise in terms of meaning, the first being “objection as to contradiction between the antecedent and the subsequent” (*snga phyi’ gal bar brgal ba*)” (Nance 2012b, 119). This phrasing is reminiscent of the discussion on *sambandha*, where the Cūḷabhayaṭṭhera discusses the connection with what was “stated beforehand” (*yathāvutta*)” (Mil-ṭ 1,¹⁷) and Vasubandhu cites the “connection that pertains to the sequence of [what is] antecedent and subsequent” (*snga phyi nyid go rims kyi mtshams sbyar ba, *pūrvottaratākramānusaṃdhi*) (Nance 2012b, 117). The difference here, however, is that the focus is flipped: while *sambandha* is the act of making clear transitions and reinforcing links between what is said at different places in the same text or in distinct texts altogether, *anuyoga* and *parhāra* are deployed to discover any antinomies or paradoxes lurking below the surface of a text and to explain them away with reference to the teaching as a whole.

The second type of objection to meaning discussed by Vasubandhu is “objection as to contradiction with reason,” which given his own concern with pan-South Asian debates on epistemology and the *pramāṇas*, he defines as contradicting “perception, inference, and authoritative speech” (Nance 2012b, 119). Beyond the restricted parameters of philosophical debate Vasubandhu was concerned with, it might also be helpful to expand “contradiction with reason” to include objections made when the root text seems to contradict common sense, or what might be called convention. For this is what is seen in the following example from the Mil-ā, which demonstrates an objection made when both the Buddha’s teaching and convention appear to be contradicted. This example centres around the well-known question about the nature

of individual existence central to Buddhist thought. In the root text, King Milinda asks Nāgasena: “How is your Reverence known and what, Sir, is your name?” (Mil trans. Rhys Davids 1890b, I:40), to which Nāgasena eventually replies with the simile of the chariot after first introducing the idea that “there is no permanent individuality (no soul) involved in the matter” (Mil trans. Rhys Davids 1890b, I:40). Milinda, in turn, responds that if there is in fact no such permanent individual, no person *per se*, “who is it, pray, who gives to you members of the Order your robes and food and lodging and necessaries for the sick?” (Mil trans. Rhys Davids 1890b, I:41). Milinda then goes on to undermine the validity of the very path to enlightenment that seems to presuppose the existence of a person. The contradiction that arises here is between the perspective of ultimate (*P. paramattha*) truth, where there is no such entity as a person, and the discourses of the Buddha, where he consistently speaks by invoking the concept of persons, such as when monks and nuns are said to receive *dāna* and lay men and women are said to reap rewards as a result of their acts of giving to the *saṅgha*.

Though this issue is not directly addressed in the root text, the Mingun Jetavana anticipates in his commentary the question as to why the Buddha did not use the categories of ultimate truth in his discourses to clarify what he meant in more precise terms. Aptly demonstrating both the *anuyoga* and *parihāra* strategies, the Mingun Jetavana tries to explain away this apparent contradiction as follows, referencing the Buddha’s discourse on the four types of persons:

From the [perspective of] the ultimate [truth], from the fact that one does not take notice of the person, now [Milinda] said: if from the [perspective] of the ultimate [truth] no person is to be found, when thus persons were not found to exist, then why did the Fortunate One [say] ‘there is the person, there is a path of action leading to personal welfare’? [For example, why did he say] ‘To me, O Monks, there are four types of persons to be found, existing in the world’? And [why did he] make known the person’s fact of existence here and there? On account of the disposition of those ready to be taught. The master [taught] in this and that way for those persons who should be taught,

skilled [as he was] in taming those fit to be tamed according to their dispositions, he preached the *dhamma* in accord with the conventions of the world, utilizing the [concept of the] person now and then.¹⁴⁹

In attempting to resolve this contradiction, the Mingun Jetavana appeals to a fundamental and ubiquitous technique of Buddhist commentary, that is, divining the intention (*P. adhippāya*, *S. abhiprāya*) of the Buddha.¹⁵⁰ The idea here is that “the various accounts regarding truth found in the *sūtra* corpus do not contradict one another, since each such account is properly understood to be motivated by (and responsive to) particular audiences, aims, and interests; situational demands shape what a Buddha says” (Nance 2012b, 119). In the Pali context, commentators devised a fourfold scheme as to why the Buddha delivered a specific discourse at a specific time, known as the four “reasons for laying down a *suttanta*” (*P. suttanikkhepa*) (von Hinüber 2013, 372).¹⁵¹ The first item in this scheme, and often “the first question asked by Buddhaghosa,” is “the Buddha’s own intention or disposition (*attajjhāsaya*), which induces him to act without being asked to do so” (von Hinüber 2013, 372). The second item in this list, explains von Hinüber, “is the disposition of another person (*parajjhāsaya*). This applies, if the Buddha recognizes in somebody the readiness to make spiritual progress” (von Hinüber 2013, 372). It is

¹⁴⁹ *na pana paramatthato puggalassa atthibhāvato ti/ etthāha/ yadi paramatthato puggalo na upalabbhati/ evaṃ pana puggale anupalabbhamāne atha kasmā bhagavā atthi puggalo attahitāya paṭipanno ti ca/ cattārome bhikkhave puggalā santo saṃvijjamānā lokasmiṃ ti ca tattha tattha puggalassa atthibhāvaṃ pavedesī ti/ veneyyajjhāsaya vasena/ tathā tathā vinetabbānaṃ hi puggalānaṃ ajjhāsaya vasena vineyyadamanakusalo satthā dhammaṃ desento lokasamaññānurūpaṃ tattha tattha puggalaggahaṇaṃ karoti/ na paramatthato puggalassa atthibhāvato/ api ca aṭṭhahi kāraṇehi bhagavā puggalakathaṃ katheti (Mil-a 77,²⁻¹¹)*

¹⁵⁰ Indeed, it is not just the intention of the Buddha that is the object of commentarial investigation, for as Gornall shows in Sumaṅgala’s commentary on Buddhadatta’s *Abhidhammāvatāra*, Sumaṅgala “sometimes refers to an objection that he thinks was ‘hidden’ (*antolīna*) in Buddhadatta’s mind (*manasi*) or heart (*hadaye*) at the time of composition” (Gornall 2020, 99). Gornall calls such instances “forays in the psychology of authorial intention,” arguing that they “serve to create parallel structures in the root text and the commentary” (Gornall 2020, 99)

¹⁵¹ See, for example, comments on the *suttanikkhepas* in the *aṭṭhakathā* to the *Suttanipāta* of the *Khuddakanikāya*, the *Paramatthajotikā*, ascribed to Buddhaghosa: *khaggavisāṇasuttaṃ. kā uppatti? sabbasuttānaṃ catubbidhā uppatti — attajjhāsaya to, parajjhāsaya to, aṭṭhuppattito, pucchāvasito cāti. dvayatānupassanādīnañhi attajjhāsaya to uppatti, mettasuttādīnaṃ parajjhāsaya to, uragasuttādīnaṃ aṭṭhuppattito, dhammikasuttādīnaṃ pucchāvasito. tattha khaggavisāṇasuttassa avisesena pucchāvasito uppatti (Pj II, 46,¹⁴⁻²⁰).*

precisely the disposition of others that the Mingun Jetavana stresses in the excerpt above, namely, their lack of readiness in receiving teaching in terms of the ultimate truth void of the category of person. When taken together, the first two of the four *suttanikkhepas* capture the “situational demands” mentioned by Nance, namely, the interplay between the Buddha’s intention as teacher and the listener’s receptivity as student that commentators often try to elucidate when resolving a contradiction on the surface of a *sutta*.

Such enlightened intentions operative in the text are responsive not only to the situational demands of the particular audience and their dispositions, but also the constraints of reason, such that the Buddha is seen to be acting for the welfare of his audience only within the confines of what is reasonable to exegetes often far removed from the time and place of the discourse. Hence, someone like the Mingun Jetavana “must determine the meanings of scriptural passages by appealing to the likely motives behind them—motives that must be gauged by a combination of reason together with a broad familiarity with the possibilities of the Buddha’s intentions” (Gold 2015, 119). For the Mingun Jetavana, reason is not limited to direct perception and inference, but includes common sense and parlance, as is seen in this next example where he continues to resolve the above contradiction between the teaching of non-self and the colloquial nature of the *sutta* discourses:

When it is said ‘the aggregates, the elements, the sense-spheres receive *dāna*,’ the people do not understand. They are confused. Or, you [become their] enemy. What is this called, [when it is said] that the aggregates, elements, and sense-spheres receive [*dāna*]. But when it is said ‘a person receives [*dāna*],’ they understand, they are not confused, they are not [your] enemy. From that, the Fortunate One told the story of the person meant to explain the purity of the gift. Buddhas, Fortunate Ones, do not abandon the conventions of the world. They preach the *dhamma* just as one unmoved, in the expression[s] of the

world, according to the designation[s] of the world. Therefore, the Fortunate One told the story of the person so as to not abandon the designation[s] of the world.¹⁵²

The key point being made here is not only that buddhas speak to their audiences “without abandoning the conventions of the world” (P. *lokasammutiñca buddhā bhagavanto na pajahanti*), but that they themselves are not deluded by such conventions, always teaching under the rubric of ultimate truth.¹⁵³ What this excerpt exemplifies is that in the act of raising questions and resolving them, the commentator makes productive use of the tension between Buddhist doctrine and social convention, highlighting the need to rearticulate or even manipulate such doctrine for an audience which might not be intellectually receptive or able to grasp it in its “ultimate” form. In this sense, *anuyoga* and *parihāra* often require the commentator to account for not just the internal consistency of a text or textual corpus, but in how that text is received and understood by non-experts, even by those hostile to the teaching as a whole. Put simply, *anuyoga* and *parihāra* carry the act of exegesis beyond the text, forcing the commentary to be consistent with the conventions and designations of a wider audience that includes followers and opponents alike.

¹⁵² *khandhā dānaṃ paṭiggaṇhanti/ dhātuyo āyatanānī ti vutte pi mahājano na jānāti/ sammohaṃ āpajjati/ paṭisattu vā hoti/ kimidaṃ khandhā dhātū āyatanānī paṭiggaṇhanti nāmā ti/ puggalo paṭiggaṇhātī ti pana vutte jānāti na sammohaṃ āpajjati/ na paṭisattu hoti/ tasmā bhagavā dakkhiṇāvisuddhidīpanatthaṃ puggalakathaṃ kathesi/ lokasammutiñca buddhā bhagavanto na pajahanti/ lokasamaññāya lokābhilāpe thitā yeva dhammaṃ desenti/ tasmā bhagavā lokasammutiyaṃ appahānatthaṃ pi puggala kathaṃ kathesi ti* (Mil-a 77,³⁰⁻³⁵-78,¹⁻³)

¹⁵³ On this issue, Levman points to a discussion in the *Arahantasutta* of the *Samyuttanikāya* where “a god notices various monks using the term ‘I’ and wonders if they are *khīṇāsava* (“free from mental obsessions”),” since by using this reflexive term they appear to be subscribing to the view of personal identity (B. G. Levman 2020, 169). The Buddha responds that they are indeed *arahants* and “are only following the conventions of the world (*vohāramattena so vohareyya*),” to which Buddhaghosa in his commentary (Spk I, 51,²⁰⁻²⁵) adds that speaking of the aggregates as agents in lieu of the pronoun “I” would “violate conventional discourse” (B. G. Levman 2020, 169–70). For more on how Buddhists navigate the tension between conventional discourse and ultimate truth, see Levman (2020, 169–89).

Conclusion

Over the course of this discussion, a progression in the six commentarial strategies has emerged. Instead of being just an enumeration of isolated elements following one after the other, the sixfold list found in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* represents a kind of exegetical spectrum, beginning with an affirmation of the pedigree of the root text being commented on and its place in the authoritative textual corpus (i.e., *sambandha*), moving to the mechanics of the text and the grammar of individual words and compounds (i.e., *pada* and *padavibhāga*), and reaching a climax with an analysis of meaning and its social production (i.e., *pad'attha*), which is then debated and defended in public or for future generations (i.e., *anuyoga* and *parihāra*). The progression of this spectrum is ensured by the dynamic overlap between the different elements, where each strategy is coloured by that which precedes it and lends itself to that which follows. Hence like the overlap between *pada* and *padavibhāga*, and between *padavibhāga* and *pad'attha*, the explication of meaning cannot be separated from the fifth and sixth strategies of commentary, *anuyoga* and *parihāra*. For while *pad'attha* signals the moment where exegesis becomes a social act, these last two are not only the point at which another interlocuter is invoked, but where rival religious, philosophical, or even political perspectives are given space to stand in opposition to the root text and its apparently authoritative claims. These final two strategies thus represent one end of the spectrum of commentarial methodology, where the setting itself becomes communal and meaning is not taken at face value but is contested, negotiated, and ultimately, defended against the view of others, whether in the present or at some indeterminate future time. In their similarity with *sambandha* and the smoothing out of the text, *anuyoga* and *parihāra* come full circle and bring the sixfold strategies back to where they began. For like *sambandha*, these last two strategies are meant to uncover any apparent or fundamental

contradiction in the system when taken together. In this way, *anuyoga* and *parihāra* provide a sort of closure to the commentarial project, staking the position of the commentator who is striving to speak on behalf of the community and foreclosing, at least provisionally, further debate or exegesis. Yet by bringing the issue back to one of *sambandha*, *anuyoga* and *parihāra* promise to begin the process anew, either in a single commentary, or in the generation of new commentarial forms. The sixfold list of commentarial strategies, or in whatever permutation such lists assume, are thus at the heart of the recursive nature of commentary itself.

As part of this recursive project, a commentator is forced to take their exegesis into the community, thereby “refashion[ing] and relocate[ing]” (Patton 1977, 7) the root text for a contemporary audience often far removed from the conditions and ethos surrounding the laying down of the “original” teaching in question. Speaking about this “rejuvenation of the ancient in the present,” Ganeri calls it the “creative act” of commentary which “seeks new articulations of a relationship with the past” (Ganeri 2011, 115). One way to accomplish this creative act is through the combination of the six exegetical strategies outlined above, a form of commentarial practice according to which an exegete like the Mingun Jetavana executes their craft while still showing deference and submission to tradition. Laurie Patton emphasizes that a focus on this commentarial practice—a focus this chapter has adopted—is “historically productive” insofar as it “shows—both directly and indirectly—the ways in which commentators perceive social circumstances to have changed and how they create new forms to address that change” (Patton 1977, 7). By examining the six exegetical strategies as found in the *Mil-a*, we are now in a better position to articulate just how the Mingun Jetavana was able to “create new [commentarial] forms” to make sense of the transformations of Burmese society and the history of the *sāsana* therein he was witnessing in the first half of the twentieth century—the purview of subsequent

chapters. While the six strategies are fundamental to the commentarial project and used in varying degrees by previous exegetes, their application and interplay is what allows for each new commentator to “refashion” the root text and introduce her or his own innovative interpretations at each new stage of doctrinal and textual development. Describing this process of innovation, Preisdanz explains that “the need to systematize, avoid contradictions and update the terminology, and the urge to prove and justify [...] the basic tenets of the respective tradition within the frame of contemporary philosophical thought were important driving factors for the development of new ideas in ‘creative’ commentaries” (Preisdanz 2008, 607). In Preisdanz’s words, several of the basic functions of the six strategies can be seen, including the systematisation of a text in *sambandha*, the update of terminology through creative etymologies in *pad’attha*, and the urge to prove and justify one’s position under *anuyoga-parihāra*.

Hence while “[t]here is no doubt that commentators were generally conservative in that they respected tradition and were ever fearful of being viewed as schismatics” (Gornall 2020, 89), they were also able to use the vehicle of commentary and its combination of techniques to introduce innovations and change into their communities without making a clear or even implicit break with the past. Indeed, it is their very reliance on the past that allows them to reform and transform their present in the first place, and this reliance is exactly what is seen in the case of the Mil-a, where the Mingun Jetavana couches his critique of the status quo in the original, forward-looking intent of the Buddha. In a sense, then, the Mingun Jetavana needs to appear as orthodox, as submitting to tradition, and as conservative, not as a revolutionary bent on challenging what came before. As such, his commentary does not appear as a radically modern or new type of exegesis but follows many of the strategies and conventions of the *aṭṭhakathā*

genre. Yet by questioning “the conservative rhetoric” and traditionalist language that commentaries appropriate for themselves, Gornall explains that “we can begin to see these assertions for what they are: claims for authority that often mask the hidden politics and struggle over the development of doctrine” (Gornall 2020, 89). It is to precisely these claims for authority and struggles over the development of doctrine that the dissertation now turns, starting with the meditation method of the Mingun Jetavana that became so central to how he interpreted the Mil and carried out his practice of composing commentary.

4 Visions of Religious Authority: Meditation in the *Milindapañhā-atthakathā* and the Mingun Jetavana's *Satipaṭṭhāna* Method

Introduction

In Part I of this dissertation, we examined negotiations around establishing the exclusive canonicity of the Mil, introduced commentarial genres and their evolution in the second millennium of Southeast Asia, and traced the spectrum of exegetical techniques at play in the Mil-a that thrust the act of writing a commentary into the social world of meaning making and drive the recursive proliferation of ever-further commentarial forms. In Part II, we take up this social world by pivoting around the figure of the Mingun Jetavana, exploring his early role in what Ingrid Jordt calls “the mass lay meditation movement” (Jordt 2007), analyzing narratives of enlightenment that surrounded him and lent his work legitimacy, and teasing out the presence of the *abhiññās* (“higher forms of knowledge”) in his lineage and how they reflect the Mingun Jetavana’s understanding of the longevity and vitality of the Buddha’s *sāsana* in the first half of the twentieth century. The point of the next three chapters is not to provide a biographical sketch of the Mingun Jetavana so much as to flesh out the world in which he was writing his commentary and to ground the debate around the Mil-a in a larger socio-religious ethos. This ethos will in turn position us to more fully appreciate what the Mingun Jetavana envisioned in composing his commentary and to better understand the political impact of his calls for reform set forth in the Mil-a.

In the chapter at hand, I examine the history of *vipassanā* meditation in early modern and modern Burma, making the case for the integral role of the Mingun Jetavana in the formation of

the modern, reform movement of mass-participation, lay-centered meditation. This meditation movement asserted itself as what Niklas Foxeus identifies as one of many different “competing visions of religious authority” (Foxeus 2014, 85) that emerged throughout the twentieth century in Burma. By highlighting the Mingun Jetavana’s seminal role in the rise of this movement, which became a social and political force in Burma, we are able to better understand not only the preoccupation with meditation theory in the Mil-a, but the reasons why an obscure commentary in a prestige language caused such a fierce reaction among the monastic hierarchy, government ministries, and in the public sphere. By further delving into the specific techniques of the Mingun Jetavana and probing the deep commentarial logic of the Mil-a, it will also become clear that this commentary was but one plank in a larger project initiated by the Mingun Jetavana and carried on by his disciples, devotees, and their praxis-based communities in the decades after his death. As this chapter will thus demonstrate, the Mil-a cannot be fully analyzed in isolation or intertextually but must also be seen as an act of public-facing social commentary.

The chapter begins with a polemical article appearing just before the Sixth Council in the *Mran mā. alanḥ* (မြန်မာ့အလင်း: *Light of Myanmar*; introduced in Chapter Two as the *Light of Burma*) newspaper that introduces the Mingun Jetavana as a major figure in the revival of *vipassanā*, or insight meditation in Burma. This section is followed by a brief sketch of the early modern and modern history of Burmese *vipassanā* practice, and while my review will not be exhaustive, I suggest that the history of *vipassanā* stretches back at least to the nineteenth and late eighteenth centuries. The main purpose of this brief history is to act as a backdrop to highlight the innovations of the Mingun Jetavana himself and to explain why he is considered such a crucial figure in the rise of the mass lay meditation movement of the twentieth century, especially his innovation with the place of the meditation centre. In a section titled “Meditation

Method of the Mingun Jetavana,” I introduce the Mingun Jetavana’s specific method of *vipassanā*, presenting the *iriyāpathas* (“bodily postures”) as the primary vector for preliminary practice based on excerpts from two of his vernacular meditation manuals recently translated into English, the *Nibbāna-kathā* (*Discourse on Nibbāna*),¹⁵⁴ and the 1922 *Nibbān lamḥ ññvan* (နိဗ္ဗန်လမ်းညွှန် *Guide to Nibbāna*).¹⁵⁵ I outline the goals of the Mingun Jetavana’s technique in the section titled “*Vipassanā Ñāṇa*” before turning to a discussion on how *vipassanā* relates to *samatha* (“calming”) meditation in the Mingun Jetavana’s system. These two techniques of practice are often depicted as diametric but are found woven together in the *Mil-a* in a more comprehensive presentation of the Mingun Jetavana’s meditation theory. In the penultimate section I suggest that the frequent and extended digressions in the *Mil-a* on the topic of meditation represent not a crude attempt by the Mingun Jetavana to interject his own practice into the root text where it does not immediately belong, but as examples of the deep logic of commentary found in the *Peṭ* and the *Nett*. This deep logic relies not only on the methodology as found in these two texts, but also on the Mingun Jetavana’s own special insight as a *vipassanā* virtuoso, leading us to the next chapter, where I explore the idea that the act of writing commentary can be more productively framed not just as a scholastic exercise for the Mingun

¹⁵⁴ This text was translated by Tin Mg Myint in 2019 for use in one of the Mingun Jetavana’s meditation centres and is currently unpublished. I obtained a copy of this translation on a research trip to Myanmar that year and edited the text to make it more intelligible in English and corrected the Pali terminology. Though Tin Mg Myint’s translation is of only a small excerpt of the larger text, I have provided page numbers to a 1956 edition in Burmese script in footnotes. The original publication date is currently unknown to me, but must come sometime between 1911, when the first meditation centre was opened, and his passing in 1955.

¹⁵⁵ This second text was also first translated by Tin Mg Myint in 2018 and is currently unpublished except for use in one of the Mingun Jetavana’s meditation centres. I obtained a copy of this translation while visiting this centre and conducted a second, targeted retranslation when necessary and extensively edited the text for both English and Pali. The page numbers given in the footnotes refer to a third edition published in Burma in 1973, while the original is from 1922, in the middle of the Mingun Jetavana’s teaching career. Because of my targeted retranslations of the text, I will provide the Burmese of the selected passages in a footnote, but the bulk of the translation work was completed by Tin Mg Myint.

Jetavana, but as a form of practice constituting an essential element of the narratives of enlightenment that surrounded his life and death in the public sphere.

4.1 *Light of Burma*: Reform and Revision

In the lead up to the seminal Sixth Council in May 1954, thousands of monastics and bureaucrats from Burma and other Theravada countries gathered in Yangon to recite and standardize the Pali canon. Newspapers in Yangon and Mandalay were brimming with celebratory articles lauding learned monks and scholasticism, known in Pali as *pariyatti*. Amid the flurry of print space dedicated to the study and recitation of texts, an article appeared in the *Mran mā. alaṅḥ* (introduced above as the *Light of Burma*) newspaper on May 7th, 1954, eleven days before the council’s opening. Coming in the “Dhamma Preaching” (P. *dhamma-desanā*) section in one of the most widely circulated Yangon dailies, this article epitomizes the agenda of reform-minded, middle-class adherents of the mass lay meditation movement of *vipassanā* meditation, which positions the practice of *vipassanā* as representing the modern “rationalization and intellectualization of the Buddha’s teaching” (Jordt 2007, 84). Despite the fact that its adherents try to trace *vipassanā* to the Pali canon and the teachings of the Buddha himself, Kate Crosby refers to the *vipassanā* movement as “a modernised reform method of meditation” that seeks its origins in texts of the Suttapiṭaka and the works of classical commentators like Buddhaghosa (Crosby 2013, 12). As part of this historical revisionism that understands *vipassanā* as both original yet modern, the author of the article in question, one Ūḥ Caṃ rhaṅḥ (ဦးစံရှင်; hereafter Caṃ rhaṅḥ), reminds readers not to neglect amid the celebrations the other achievement of Buddhism in Burma, the revival of insight, or *vipassanā* meditation in the late nineteenth and

early twentieth century. In an attempt to demarcate the historical transformation that *vipassanā* is supposed to embody to its supporters, Caṃ rhañḥ, states that “in earlier times, [the people] wanted to listen to a sermon on the *dhamma* from monks [who] would preach the *dhamma* with a shrill voice [like] a baby sound, ‘cā cā cā cā,’ with a voice [like] an actor, in the voice of a jester. [Most people] paid attention to [monks] who preached *dhamma* [like] the prince’s jester or an actor, they gave prominence and paid homage [to them]”¹⁵⁶ (Caṃ rhañḥ 1954, 14). What we see presented here is a crude caricature of pre-*vipassanā* Buddhist preaching in Burma, which without a form of practice directed at enlightenment, amounted to so many empty sounds to those in the modern *vipassanā* movement. It is a caricature because surely no monk would have intentionally preached in the voice of a baby or like a court jester, but Caṃ rhañḥ seems to be exaggerating in this quote in order to contrast the preaching of *vipassanā* in a favourable light compared to what came before.

With these comments denigrating previous forms of preaching, Caṃ rhañḥ is trying to setup a contrast between a performative preaching style and the teaching of *vipassanā*. To him, it was necessary for lay people to understand the content of sermons, but this increased accessibility was not enough; while the supposedly entertaining sermons discussed Buddhist doctrine and even meditation in an intelligible, quotidian language, Caṃ rhañḥ claims they did so in an empty and ritualistic manner. Describing the contents of such sermons, Caṃ rhañḥ explains that “in terms of meditation practice (*bhāvanā*), if [people] utter ‘impermanence,’ (*anicca*)

¹⁵⁶ ရှေးအခါက တရားဟော ဘုန်းကြီးများကိုအသံကလေး စာစာ စာစာ နှင့် မင်းသားသံ လူပြက်သံပါမှတရားနာချင်ကြသည်။ ထိုမင်းသား လူပြက် ဓမ္မကထိကများကို အရေးပေးကြသည်၊ အသားပေးကြသည်၊ အလေးပြုကြသည် (Caṃ rhañḥ 1954, 14)

‘suffering,’ (*dukkha*) ‘non-self’ (*anatta*), or if they speak [an epithet of the Buddha such as] ‘*araham*,’ ‘*araham*,’ as the great abyss [of death] closed in, they are satisfied [when] the aggregates fall away and they perish”¹⁵⁷ (Caṃ rhaṅḥ 1954, 14). In this framework, though people are using the Pali words and know their intellectual connotation, their knowledge is still limited and detached. Yet by the time Caṃ rhaṅḥ was writing his article, he suggests that the situation began to change in Burma, for

now it is not like that anymore. As it is roughly remembered by me, when the Great Mohyini Sayadaw gave preaching tours, since that [time], the melodious sounds of those [previous] *dhamma* [sermons] disappeared, and the sounds of *vipassanā* [meditation] arrived and emerged[:] ‘impermanence’ (*anicca*), ‘suffering’ (*dukkha*), ‘non-self’ (*anatta*). [Now] many people have come to follow [these sounds]. The majority of people have come to turn towards *vipassanā* [and recognize] the activity of physical form (*rūpa*) [and] mental form (*nāma*).¹⁵⁸ (Caṃ rhaṅḥ 1954, 14)

Hence according to the origin story of *vipassanā* meditation, a new type of preacher arose in the first half of the twentieth century expounding the Buddhist teachings in face-to-face language with their lay audience, exhorting them to realize these teachings on their own. The content of these new style of sermons according to Caṃ rhaṅḥ was no longer how to achieve a more favorable state after death through the practice of donating monasteries or pagodas (P. *dāna*), or by heeding the moral teachings of the *jātaka* stories of the Buddha’s previous human and animal births, but the immediate application of contemplative practice to this life, what the author refers to as “experiencing the practice yourself” (ကြောင့်ကိုယ်တိုင် လက်တွေ့ ခံစား *kroṅ. kuiy tuiṅ lak*

¹⁵⁷ဘာဝနာဘဘက်ကဆိုလျှင်လည်း အနိစ္စ ဒုက္ခ အနတ္တ ဆို၍ အရဟံ အရဟံ ဆို၍ ပတီးကြီး တချောက်ချောက် စိပ်လျက်ကျေနပ်ရင်းပင် ခန္ဓာပြောင်းကြွေသေလွန်ကြရလေသည်။

¹⁵⁸နောက်အချိန် တွင် ထိုသို့ မဟုတ်တော့ပေ။ ကျွန်ုပ် တို့မှတ်မိသလောက်မှာ မိုးညှင်း ဆရာတော် သုရားကြီး နယ်လှည့်တရားဟောသည်မှစ၍ ထိုတရားသီချင်း သံများ ပျောက်ကွယ်လျက် အနိစ္စ ဒုက္ခ အနတ္တ ဝိပဿနာသံများ ပေါ်ပေါက်လာပေတော့သည်။ လူအများ လိုက်စားလာပေတော့သည်။ ရုပ်နာမ် ဖြစ် ပျက် ဝပဿနာ ဘက်သို့ လူအများမျက်နှာလှည့်လာပေတော့သည်။

tve. kham cāḥ) (Caṃ rhaṅḥ 1954, 14). This emphasis on personal verification is an essential element of the rhetoric around the mass lay meditation movement as identified by Ingrid Jordt. The animating and revolutionary belief of this movement is that the “laity can gain insight into the most difficult and penultimate insights of the Buddha's teachings through meditation and not through study of the scripture,” meaning that “a new source of verification for the teachings has arisen outside scriptural orthodoxy” (Jordt 2007, 84). Such is the reason why Caṃ rhaṅḥ felt the need to contrast the events of the Sixth Council with the rise of *vipassanā*, to highlight the latter as a means and safeguard of the Buddha’s teachings at par or even more fundamental than the recitation of scriptures. He is in effect implying that the recitation of scriptures is not sufficient, eleven days before the grandest pageant of *pariyatti* in his generation. Instead, what is truly meaningful for him is the rise of meditative practice among the laity, the fact that in the mid-twentieth century, the “majority of people have come to turn towards *vipassanā*.”

4.2 Early History of Modern *Vipassanā*

While the revisionist account represented by Caṃ rhaṅḥ’s newspaper article cannot be taken uncritically, it does reveal the stakes around the history of *vipassanā* in Burma and hints at some of the main players in the rise of the mass lay meditation movement. For example, the Mohnyin Sayadaw (မိုယ်ညှင်းဆရာတော် Muiyḥ ñṅhaṅḥ Cha rā tau, 1872-1964; first seen in the introduction as the Mohnyin) (Tin Than Myint 2008, ix) is mentioned above as one of the first such meditation teachers that Caṃ rhaṅḥ can “roughly remember.” The Mohnyin began teaching *vipassanā* around 1921 after an encounter with the Ledi Sayadaw (လယ်တီဆရာတော် Lay tī Cha rā tau, a.k.a., ဦးညှာတေဇ Ṁḥ Ñāṇadhaja, 1846-1923; hereafter the Ledi), one of the most well-known scholar monks of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Burma. According to

Gustaaf Houtman, “[i]n 1932 (1294) [the Mohnyin] began to travel and preach in Rangoon, Moulmein, Mein-myoo, and he became famous” as a teacher of *vipassanā* (Houtman 1990b, 291). In the 1920s and 30s, Tin Than Myint reports that “people were interested in the meditation practice [...] not only individual practice but also group practice” (Tin Than Myint 2008, ix). Clearly then the Mohnyin was not the progenitor of *vipassanā* practice but inherited it at a time when its popularity was growing. The question then arises, if the Mohnyin was not the first to teach *vipassanā* techniques or the catalyst for its revival, when did this modernist reform method of meditation arise in Burma? It is difficult to answer this question without greater access to manuscript witnesses from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Cousins, for example, laments that it does not seem “possible, at present, to trace the lineage of the present-day insight meditation tradition beyond the nineteenth century” in Burma (Cousins 1994, 41), partly because of the relative lack of textual evidence earlier than the nineteenth century.

While Cousins is right about this relative lack of evidence, Tin Than Myint briefly explores hints of *vipassanā* practice in the history of Burma. In one treatise, the *Explanation of Purity* (*Visuddhi Dīpanī*) published in 1898 by the Burmese Thantawsint Press, there is a book mentioned named *Kavindābhisiri saddhamma mahādhammarājādhirājaguru*, which I translate as *The True Dhamma of the Most Glorious Learned Ones, Teachers of the Great Dhamma to Kings and Kings of Kings* (Tin Than Myint 2008, vi).¹⁵⁹ Apparently written by a forest-dwelling monk, Tin Than Myint claims this text, which seems to be a survey of the teachings of monks connected to the royal courts of previous Burmese dynasties, implies “the existence of the ariyas

¹⁵⁹ Tin Than Myint has taken this information from Ṭheḥ lhuin ([1961] 1993, 65), known hereafter by his usual transcribed name, Htay Hlaing.

[noble ones] who compiled the *Vipassanā* texts” as far back as the Bagan Period (849-1287 C.E.) (Tin Than Myint 2008, vi). Tin Than Myint surveys other indirect evidence about the practice of *vipassanā* in subsequent periods, but no teachers or practitioners are mentioned by name until the eighteenth century. One example comes from the *Mahārāja wañ tau kyau* (မဟာရာဇဝင်တော်ကျော် *The Celebrated Great Chronicle of Kings*) from the early 1830s and discussed by Patrick Pranke, who claims that “prior to the eighteenth century in Burma, as elsewhere in the Theravada world, it was generally believed that it was no longer possible to attain enlightenment and hence nibbāna through *vipassanā* or any other means during the present age” (Pranke 2010, 455). A monk from the Sagaing Hills in Upper Burma named Waya-zawta was, according to Pranke, “one of the earliest known [cases] of someone who challenged this assumption” (Pranke 2010, 455). In this chronicle, it is said that this Waya-zawta “promised his followers *sotāpanna* through *anāgāmi* status if they would follow his teachings,” meaning they could make significant progress towards the final goal of *nibbāna* according to Theravada soteriological theory (Pranke 2010, 455). Though Pranke does not identify the exact teachings or doctrines promulgated by this monk, Braun claims that Waya-zawta “started a *vipassanā* movement in the 1720s and 30s” (Braun 2013, 28). If true, this movement laid the groundwork for the gradual rise of *vipassanā* techniques over the next two centuries by unlocking the soteriological potential of the pre-modern and early modern periods and changing the landscape of what was possible through meditation practice.

In the early Konbaung period (1752-1885), both Pranke and Braun identify a “young scholar-monk named Medawi (1728-1816) [who] began writing *vipassanā* manuals in the vernacular” (Pranke 2010, 457). According to Pranke, Medawi “wrote over thirty meditation manuals during his career” and even received “a royal title and monastic endowment” for his

writings on *vipassanā* from King Bodawphaya (Pranke 2010, 458), though despite this recognition from the court, Braun cautions that “[t]here is no indication [...] that this sayadaw taught meditation widely or that his works had extensive reach (Braun 2013, 29). Moving to the lineage of the Mingun Jetavana specifically and the reign of King Mindon, there existed “a renown[ed] meditation master by the name of Venerable Theelon Sayadaw” (Tin Than Myint 2008, 16). The Thilone Toya Sayadaw (သီးလုံတောရဆရာတော် *Sīḥ luṃ to ra Cha tā tau* a.k.a. ဦးစန္ဒိမလီကရ *Ūḥ Candimāṅlakara*, 1786-1861; henceforth the Thilone) was renowned for his erudition in the *Tipiṭaka* and was close to Mindon’s royal court (see fig. 4). Though his legend is still extant, the same cannot be said for any of his compositions on meditation, though he is said to have written one “treatise” on Buddhist practice, which Htay Hlaing notes was not about his own method (Houtman 1990, 295). Neither is he considered to have developed his own unique technique, but was in fact encouraged to take up meditation by his senior, the Kingtawya Sayadaw (ကင်းတောရဆရာတော် *Kaṅ to ra Cha rā tau*, a.k.a., ဦးခေမာ *Ūḥ Khema*, yrs. unkn.; hereafter the Kingtawya) (Thi trans. Hla Myat Thu 2013, 13). Yet the presence of these two figures intimates that a continuous lineage of *vipassanā* circulated as far back as the eighteenth century in the highest echelons of the monkhood, and it is to this lineage that the Mingun Jetavana locates himself.

The difficulty in tracing the lineage even further is partly because of the nature of practitioner monks, who often lived away from urban centers in semi-isolation in the forest, as the Kingawya was said to have done. It must also be admitted that modern scholars might be interpolating their own paradigms into the past of what meditation practice involves, or at least in terms of the textual evidence we can expect to find. For despite the fact that Pranke refers to Medawi's writings as the "very earliest 'how-to' *vipassanā* books" we have (Pranke 2010, 457), the idea of a "meditation text" may have been largely foreign or even inappropriate to most teachers before the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. In contrast to the self-help framework of today, meditation was probably not considered something one could learn by themselves from a text, at least not a true beginner.

Indeed, receiving instruction from a teacher (*P. ācariyaladdhopadesa*) directly was all-important in the pursuit of mental cultivation, in part because of the dangers associated with wrongly

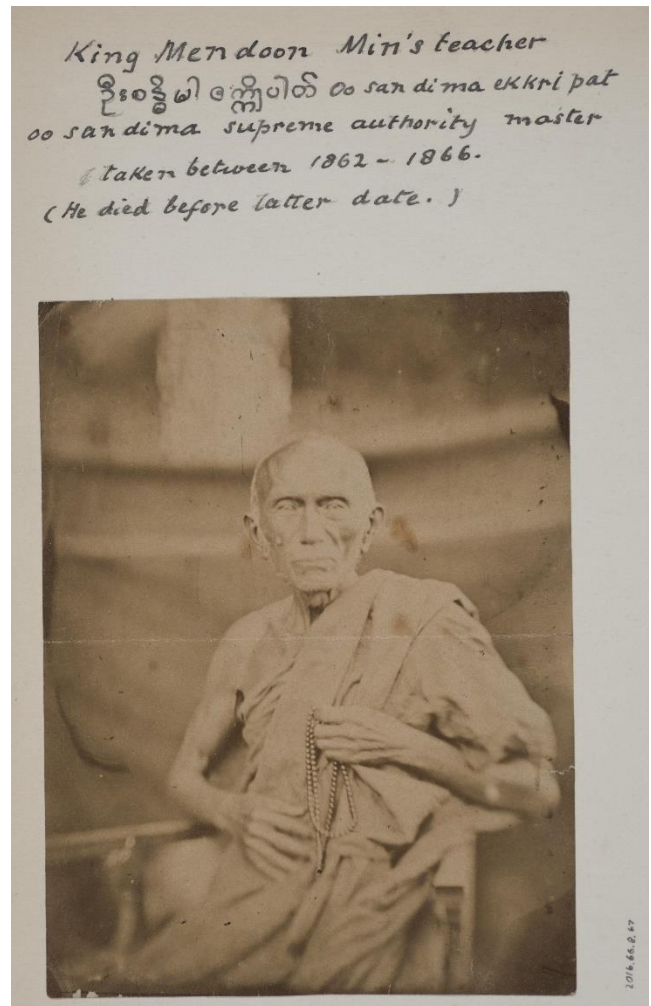


Figure 4: A photograph of the Thilone from the Clement Williams Collection at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada. Handwriting by Clement Williams referring to the Thilone as King Mindon's teacher and the "supreme authority master." Accession number ROM2016.66.8.67. I must thank Ronald Graham for bringing this photograph to my attention and pointing out its significance to me.

progressing on the path of practice, meaning this one-to-one relationship was probably the main vector for the transmission of techniques. Yet despite this largely in-person transmission, when “seeking to uncover past meditation practice, we are primarily dependent on texts, entirely so in the absence of unbroken living traditions” (Skilton, Crosby, and Pyi Phyo Kyaw 2019, 5). Given the necessity of the textual-historical method, it is imperative to look for traces of *vipassanā* transmission less directly by widening the concept of “meditation text” to include subcommentaries, vernacular translations of Pali works, handbooks or scholastic manuals (P. *dīpanī*), elaborate Pali-Burmese bitexts (P. *nissaya* နိဿယ), or even sermon and class notes. Fitting in with the argument of this and the next chapter, it could be in the form of Pali and vernacular commentarial genres where we are most likely to find traces of *vipassanā* lineages and techniques, since many of the meditation texts may have been envisioned as exegetical in nature.¹⁶⁰

Yet the picture changes dramatically in the nineteenth century, as “many treatises on meditation appeared, and a distinct emphasis on meditation emerges also in the chronicles (*ya-za-win*)” (Houtman 1990b, 36). For instance, “in the *Sāsanavaṃsappadīpaka*, written in 1861, it is stated matter-of-factly that persons possessed of extraordinary meditative attainments flourish in the present age, and should anyone choose to take up the practice of *vipassanā*, it is surely possible that that person could attain *arahantship* in a single lifetime” (Pranke 2010, 459). Pranke goes on to emphasize that “King Mindon himself enthusiastically promoted interest in *vipassanā* at the royal court and under his patronage several treatises on *vipassanā* were

¹⁶⁰ The state of Burmese manuscript study is also inchoate, but as further collections of older texts are accessed and digitised, it should be possible for future researchers to find further evidence of *vipassanā* practice in the eighteenth century and before, assuming it existed at all.

composed” (Pranke 2010, 460). One author of many such treatises was the first Shwegyin Sayadaw (ရွှေကျင်ဆရာတော် Rhve kyañ cha rā tau, a.k.a., ဦးဇာဂရ Ṫh Jāgara, 1822-1893; hereafter the Shwegyin),¹⁶¹ whose teacher was the Thilone mentioned above (Tin Tin Nyo 2010, 103–4). In her 2010 dissertation, Tin Tin Nyo discusses the *Aṭṭhika kammaṭṭhāna kyamḥ* (အဋ္ဌိကကမ္မဋ္ဌနကျမ်း *Treatise on the Meditation Subject of Bone[s]*), written by the Shwegyin sometime before 1873.¹⁶² Tin Tin Nyo explains that the Shwegyin composed the *Aṭṭhika kammaṭṭhāna kyamḥ* “because of the requests made by theras [elder monks] who wanted to practice meditation alone by themselves,” which requires them to perform the seven ascetic supports (P. *nissaya*), such as begging for food, having only three robes, sitting under a tree, and using natural medicine, along with possessing “the ability to practice without a teacher” (Tin Tin Nyo 2010, 103). Given these requirements, it can be assumed that the intended audience was composed of mature monastics who had established themselves in monastic discipline.

However, it seems that these monks were not adept at the practice of meditation. This observation stems from the fact that while the Shwegyin taught the meditation method of mindfulness relating to the 32 parts of the body (P. *dvattiṃsa kāya-gata-sati-kammaṭṭhānam*), which he learned from the Thilone directly, he argued in this text that “it is difficult for *mandabuddhi puggalas* (dull-witted persons) to bear in mind if the reflections of all the body parts beginning from the head hair are taught in detail” (Tin Tin Nyo 2010, 104). Moreover, he further insists that one can attain the concentration of the state of absorption (P. *appaṇā-jhāna*)

¹⁶¹ “*Jāgara*” is a Pali adjective meaning “awake; watchful” (Cone, s.v. *jāgara*).

¹⁶² This date is only approximate, but the *Aṭṭhika kammaṭṭhāna kyamḥ* can be placed before 1873, because this treatise was mentioned as part of the corpus of the Shwegyin in a book published that same year (Tin Tin Nyo 2010, 106).

without recourse to all 32 parts of the body, hence the Shwegyin “explained *aṭṭhikoṭṭhāsa*, *antakoṭṭhāsa* and *matt[h]aluṅga-koṭṭhāsa* (bone, intestine and brain body part) only” to these *theras*, especially contemplation of the skeleton, as the title of the treatise implies (Tin Tin Nyo 2010, 104). Tellingly, while the Shwegyin appears to have promoted a more simplified method of meditation to the audience of the *Aṭṭhika kammaṭṭhāna kyamḥ*, he “did so with a view to teach them *kammaṭṭhāna* which leads up to *arahattaphala*,” or the “fruit of *arahantship*,” the final stage on the Theravada path to *nibbāna* (Tin Tin Nyo 2010, 103). Given the description above and the reference to the “concentration of the state of absorption,” the Shwegyin was teaching not *vipassanā* in the sense understood by the Mingun Jetavana and modern reformers a generation later, but *samatha*, or calming meditation. While the exact boundaries and overlap between *vipassanā* and *samatha* techniques are a matter of protracted debate in Burma, the Shwegyin’s approach appears to support the suggestion by Cousins, that *vipassanā* proper “must always have existed as an adjunct to *samatha* meditation and as a practice for advanced *samatha* meditators” (Cousins 1994, 42).

Also before 1873, the Shwegyin composed the *Bojjhaṅgadīpanī* (*Manual on the [Seven] Factors of Enlightenment*) in Burmese prose (Tin Tin Nyo 2010, 101–2). According to Tin Tin Nyo, this book was an “explanation of the chapter known as *Catubhāṅavāra-kathā* [(*Discourse on the Fourth Section*)] of the [...] *Visuddhimagga*” (Tin Tin Nyo 2010, 102), which contained many protective chants (P. *paritta* ဝရိဝိဒ် *parit*), the recitation of which would not be considered as *vipassanā* practice by contemporary scholars or modern reformists like Caṃ rhañḥ above. Indeed, the Shwegyin apparently composed this book “so that some could recite the Pāli cited in the said *catubhāṅavāra* sutta only,” specifically, according to Tin Tin Nyo, those who were not sufficiently intelligent or mature in their spiritual path (Tin Tin Nyo 2010, 102). It is not clear

whether this text was for monks or lay people, since Tin Tin Nyo stresses that the Shwegyin composed it at the request of “devotees,” such that they might practice meditation and experience nirvana up to the stage of *arahattaphala*, the final fruit of enlightenment according to the Theravada system (Tin Tin Nyo 2010, 102). The reason for this ambiguity over audience, besides the equivocation of the word “devotee,” is that while the Shwegyin seems to have believed it possible for monastics to achieve *arahantship* during his time, it is not clear whether he believed lay people had the same potential. There is, however, evidence that some of these books were specifically directed at lay people, such as the *Upāsakovāda rhu bhvay* (ဥပါသကောဝါဒရှုဘွယ် *Instructions for Lay Men on Meditation*)¹⁶³ from 1879 (Tin Tin Nyo 2010, 112). While this book contains instructions to recite the nine attributes of the Buddha aloud and in a group, it also contains instructions on diverse forms of *samatha* meditation taken from the *Vism*, such as contemplation of the decay of corpses, along with, according to Tin Tin Nyo, guidelines on techniques of *vipassanā* (Tin Tin Nyo 2010, 113). At the end of this book, the Shwegyin explains that he is providing a “method of not too elaborate nor too brief *kammathāna* [“meditation”] development [...] [that] will be very beneficial to all noble donors” (Tin Tin Nyo 2010, 113). The purpose of this text is thus remarkable, since teaching meditation to the laity, indicated by the term “noble donors” and the Pali word “*upāsaka*” in the title, is considered a hallmark of the twentieth-century spread of modern, reform *vipassanā*. However, it should be noted that this text seems to also consist of instructions on protective prayers and the

¹⁶³ While “meditate” is the second definition given in the MAA, the verb “ရှု” could also be translated as “look; look at; see; view,” which is given as the first definition given (MAA, s.v. ရှု). If “look” is used instead, the meaning becomes more analytical in nature, such as *Instructions for Lay Men to Examine*, or even *Instructions for Lay Men to Analyze*, but the process of “looking” is directed at the body and mind of these male devotees, so the sense of meditation better captures the activities involved here.

attributes of the Buddha, while what Tin Tin Nyo means by “*vipassanā*” here is not entirely clear. It is unclear when we consider that Than Tun, in his history of the Shwegyin sect, “translated its proceedings since 1920. He made no reference to [*vipassanā* meditation] until the proceedings of the IXth All Shwegyin Nikaya [Shwei-gyin Ni’ke] Convention, held 18-20 February 1957, where it was resolved ‘that lessons on Vipassanā-insight, should be written and published’” (Houtman 1990, 48) (square brackets in original). Indeed, as Jason Carbine stresses, “since their founding the Shwegyin have seen themselves as a very high scholastic tradition focused on disciplinary purity and intellectual rigor in relation to the *Sāsana*” (Carbine 2011, 22). While this is not to say that monks in the Shwegyin sect have ignored meditation, it is often used “as a means for preparing the mind for study as well as for concentrating upon a particular study-lesson’s meaning” (Carbine 2011, 23). Hence given the orientation of the Shwegyin sect towards *pariyatti*, along with the social and political currency of *vipassanā* in the late 1950s, it is possible that Tin Tin Nyo or her interlocutors are interpolating *vipassanā* techniques back into the writings of the Shwegyin, but as these texts and many others suggest, some form of *vipassanā* meditation was being taught to monks and possibly lay men during the late Konbaung period.

4.3 Innovations of the Mingun Jetavana

Despite the many gaps in our knowledge about the early history of modern *vipassanā* sketched above, what can be confidently said is that the Mingun Jetavana was a major catalyst in the popularization of *vipassanā* meditation techniques among the laity—both men and women—which in turn ignited the mass lay meditation movement described by Jordt. In his newspaper article just before the Sixth Council, Caṃ rhaṅḅ moves from the Mohnyin, a top disciple of the

Ledi who does not seem to have established his own extant lineage as such, to identify the Mingun Jetavana as the root source for the practice of *vipassanā*, especially through his top student, the Mahasi Sayadaw, introduced in Chapter One:

After that time in *vipassanā*, the *saṭipatthāna* meditation method of the Great Thaton Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw become very well known in Myanmar and began to quite prominently spread among the people and monks. Then the fruits, tendrils, and the branches coming from that Great [Mingun Jetavana] Sayadaw, which is the Sāsana Meditation Centre of the Mahasi Sayadaw, blossomed. Due to diligence and effort of [Mahasi] and the Yangon Mingun Sayadaw, who spread it to every town and village, the Buddha’s teaching on practice (*paṭipatti-sāsana*) has surely become prominent [...] Thus it must be said that in Myanmar, not only is textual learning [worthy to be celebrated], but the Buddha’s teachings on practice equally so.¹⁶⁴ (Caṁ rhanḥ 1954, 14)

The later success of the Mahasi is especially remarkable because of the government support he received in opening-up a meditation centre in Yangon, the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha (မဟာစည် သာသနာ့ ရိပ်သာ *mahācaññ sāsana. rip sā*), a key plank in Prime Minister U Nu’s promotion of Buddhism in the parliamentary period. Indeed, the concept of the meditation centre was arguably the key institutional driver of the modern *vipassanā* movement in Burma.¹⁶⁵ This concept *sui generis* is also one of the main reasons why the Mingun Jetavana is considered such a formative individual in the early part of this movement, because he oversaw the opening of arguably the first known meditation centre in 1911 in the town of Myo Hla, Lower Burma (Houtman 1990b, 2). It seems that the Mingun Jetavana did not conceive of opening up this centre himself, or at

¹⁶⁴ ထိုမှတစ်ဖန် ဝိပဿနာဘက် တွင် အလွန်ထင်ရှားသော သထုံမြို့ မင်းကွန် ဇေတဝန် ဆရာတော်ကြီး ၏ သတိပဋ္ဌာန်ကမ္မဋ္ဌာန်းနည်းမှာ မြန်မာပြည်တွင် လူ ရော ရှင် ပါ အတော်ပျံ့နှံ့ထင်ပေါ်လာခဲ့ ပေသည်။ ထိုဆရာတော်ကြီး မှ ဆင်း သက် လျက်အခက်၊ အညွန့်၊ အသီး၊ အပွင့်များဖြစ်သော သာသနာ့ရိပ်သာ မဟာစည်ဆရာတော်။ ရန်ကုန်မင်းကွန်းဆရာတော် စသော ဆရာတော်များ၏ အားထုတ်မှု လုံ့လဝီရိယဖြင့် အမြို့မြို့အရွာရွာ ပျံ့နှံ့လျက် ပဋိပတ္တိသာသနာ ထွန်းကားလျက် ရှိလေသည်။... ဤသို့မြန်မာပြည်တွင် ပရိယတ္တိသာမက ပဋိပတ္တိ သာသနာတော်လည်း အထိုက် အလျောက် ထွန်းကားလာပြီဟုဆိုရပေမည်။ (Caṁ rhanḥ 1954, 14)

¹⁶⁵ I am grateful to Ryosuke Kuramoto for pointing out the importance of the meditation centre in the revival of *vipassanā* meditation in Burma, personal communication, March 2020.

least worked in collaboration, for according to his first biography, written in 1957 by the Mingun Jetavana’s disciple and personal attendant, Ṭḥ Tikkhācāra (ဦးတိက္ခာစာရ, hereafter Tikkhacara), “people led by Mr. San-dun—a devotee who had practiced mindfulness meditation until the satisfactory stage under the guidance of Min-gone Jetavan Sayādaw—managed to establish a meditation center unanimously and successfully. That was what Mr. San-dun had long dreamt of” (Bio trsl Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 46). This centre was named “Bo-de-gon” and at its opening to start the rains retreat, the Mingun Jetavana “gave a suitable dhamma talk to the audience there, and then he made statement that the meditation center was newly established for the practice of spiritual vigilance (*appamāda*) or continuous mindfulness, and all the people wishing to attain nibbāna would be warmly welcome to the center to practice vipassanā” (Bio trsl Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 47). The Mingun Jetavana only spent “two executive years” at this centre (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 49), but it was enough to establish his technique and inspire further centres in his name.

The concept of the “meditation centre” is a slightly fuzzy term, since there were certainly sites dedicated for various forms of practice inside monasteries and other religious locations. In his biography of the Thilone,¹⁶⁶ Htay Hlaing mentions that the teacher of the Thilone, Kingtawya, directed criticism at certain “places[...] which conducted meditation retreat, [...] object[ing] to some rules there because they were against the *Dhamma*” (Thi trans. Hla Myat Thu 2013, 14). This fleeting comment indicates that there were meditation retreats as far back as the eighteenth century, but without the exact location being stipulated, one must assume they

¹⁶⁶ Though it is not stipulated in the translated document in my possession, it appears that this biography of the Thilone was extracted from Htay Hlaing’s larger work, *Yahantā nhañ. pugguil thūḥ myāḥ* (ရဟန္တာနိပုဂ္ဂိုလ်ထူးများ *Arahants and Special People*) ([1961] 1993), pages 144-155.

were on monastic grounds or setup temporarily. Thus, what is unique is that the Mingun Jetavana's first centre, and the other sites derived from it, were permanently set up for no other activity than to teach, and more critically, for the dedicated practice of *vipassanā*. Moreover, it was not an exclusively monastic site, in the sense that both monks and lay people could live and practice together under the same roof, or, at least, in the same compound. For as the Mingun Jetavana declared at the opening up his first centre, "all the people wishing to attain nibbāna would be warmly welcome" (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 47). This last point is consequential, given the restrictions between monks and lay people living and eating together stipulated in the Vinayapiṭaka. By moving beyond the paradigm and place of the monastery, the Mingun Jetavana innovated with the place and structure of his teaching programme, taking practice off the monastery grounds into supposedly secular sites or specially built liminal spaces. The spaces are "liminal" because both lay and monastic learn the same practice together, with the line between the two blurred while in retreat and beyond. In these specially built places, the practice of *vipassanā* allowed lay practitioners to assume quasi-monastic status and interact with the *sāsana* beyond just donation or providing support for monks. In contrast, the Ledi did not make this same move off the monastery grounds, at least not institutionally. Instead, as Braun states, the "Ledi spent so much time promoting study groups but did much less to organize explicit meditation practice in a group setting" (Braun 2013, 144).

Another innovation of the Mingun Jetavana involves his method. This method is mentioned in the previous newspaper article as the "way of *satipaṭṭhāna*," which is based on an eponymous set of Pali *suttas* in the Suttapiṭaka known as the *Satipaṭṭhāna (Foundations of Mindfulness)*. As a young scholar-monk, it is said that the Mingun Jetavana "spent his free time in the study of all the pitaka books for a piece of message dealing with the way of meditation"

(Panyacekka 2016, n.p.). It is also said that he learned from many different meditation teachers but was unsatisfied with what he was taught. Then,

[o]ne day, Venerable Mañjūsāra [Alay to ra Sayadaw], the abbot of Middle Forest Monastery—seeing [the Mingun Jetavana] reading Pāli texts very attentively—asked what purpose he had been putting such tireless effort in the study of Pāli texts for. “For the attainment of nibbāna, sir,” he replied. Then, Venerable Mañjūsāra gave him an insightful hint as follows: “[The phrase] *Bhūtaṃ bhūtato passatha* [(“you should see the real as the real”)] alone can guide you to nibbāna.” (Bio trsl Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 21)¹⁶⁷

Although the Alay to ra Sayadaw (အလယ်တောရဆရာတော် Alay to ra Cha rā tau, a.k.a., ဦးမဉ္ဇူသာ Ūḥ Mañjūsā; hereafter the Aletawya), who is also said to be in the lineage of the Thilone, offered no further clarification or direction, the Mingun Jetavana then “researched information in all required and relevant buddhist literatures—canons, commentaries, sub-commentaries and any other reliable resources to prove U Mañjūsā’s message,” eventually realising the truth of these words in the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* (Panyacekka 2016, n.p.).¹⁶⁸ Basing his teaching on this and other *suttas*, the Mingun Jetavana then “interpreted th[is] practice... into daily usage of Myanmar language and introduced it to the people that the profound teaching of it could be fully comprehended in practical way” (Panyacekka 2016, n.p.). It is important to note here that the “Bird Cave,” or Ṇhak tvañḥ Sayadaw (ငှက်တွင်းဆရာတော် Ṇhak tvañḥ Cha rā tau, 1831-1910; hereafter the Hgnetwin) (Houtman 1990b, 285) was also said to have taught a method of meditation based on the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* as early as 1887 (Houtman 1990b, 285; Nyein Chan Maung 2006, 27), but Houtman points out the glaring omission of this well-known

¹⁶⁷ This phrase is an adaptation from the *Itivuttaka* and the *Paṭisambhidamagga*, where it is rendered as “*bhūtaṃ bhūtato passati*,” instead of with the 2nd person pl imper. “*passatha*” as above (see It 44,⁵⁻⁶; Paṭis 159,¹⁹)

¹⁶⁸ The Mingun Jetavana also had recourse to other canonical texts, including the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (*Path of Analytical Knowledge*), but much of what this text says about the practice of meditation seems to be derived from the *Satipaṭṭhāna*, while the *Visuddhimagga*, which features prominently in the writings of the Shwegyin, the Mingun Jetavana, and other meditation teachers, takes the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* as its model.

individual in Htay Hlaing’s biography ([1961] 1993) of *vipassanā* teachers, which Houtman suggests might be due to a “dislike for his methodology” (Houtman 1990b, 285). As far as I can tell, the Mingun Jetavana makes no reference to the Hngetwin in terms of the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta*, appearing to come to this group of texts on his own, but this observation does suggest that the Mingun Jetavana was likely not the first to focus on the *Satipaṭṭhāna* group of texts for meditation practice in Burma. Hence like the Hngetwin a generation before, the Mingun Jetavana based his technique on Pali texts that were well-known to monastic scholars and specialists.

In contrast to the Mingun Jetavana, the Shwegyin seems to have preferred filtering the Buddha’s teachings through commentarial and subcommentarial material like the *Vism*, rather than teaching directly through texts from the *Tipiṭaka*. The Mingun Jetavana’s preference for material from the *Tipiṭaka* to develop his method is captured in another recension of the above anecdote offered by Brohm, who writes that during his search for a technique of meditation that “would provide [...] direct access to Buddhism’s highest goal,” the Mingun Jetavana “was instructed by an aged monk of Sagaing [namely, the Aletawya], who had already scaled those heights, to seek the proper answer in the Buddha’s own words” (Brohm 1957, 342). The emphasize on the “Buddha’s own words” is certainly an exaggeration, as this anecdote is likely a kind of mythologized origin story for the Mingun Jetavana’s “discovery” of *vipassanā* meditation as told by his followers. Indeed, the Mingun Jetavana also had recourse to authoritative Pali commentaries when developing his techniques, especially the *Vism*.¹⁶⁹ Yet the Mingun Jetavana does seem to have downplayed the role of subcommentarial or vernacular

¹⁶⁹ It is also reported by Jake Davis that the Thilone, to whom the Mingun Jetavana traces his lineage, based his own method on the *Visuddhimagga* (Stuart 2017, 162).

material in his meditation teaching and valorized Pali texts from the Tipiṭaka. In this focus on texts from the Suttapiṭaka, the Mingun Jetavana was establishing one of the hallmarks of the reform-style, modern *vipassanā* movement, a preoccupation with the original and purportedly pure teachings of the Buddha (Crosby 2020, 19). As Skilton et al. point out, the “archetypal authority is of course the Buddha himself, and this sense of continuity is enforced by the apparatus of textual reference that can be invoked through canonical texts” (Skilton, Crosby, and Pyi Phyo Kyaw 2019, 5). Thus, by presenting his teachings as drawing directly from the Buddha’s teachings, the Mingun Jetavana is tapping into the authority of the Buddha himself even while he is innovating with new methods of teaching *vipassanā* meditation.

Unlike the Shwegyin, it does not seem the Mingun Jetavana modified his teachings between monastic and lay audiences or limited what he taught based on the spiritual progress or intellect of the practitioner, though he also wrote and taught in the vernacular. As discussed above, the methods of meditation the Shwegyin provided to lay people would not fall into the category of *vipassanā* meditation *per se*, at least as the Mingun Jetavana and his lineage has (re)defined this term. The more mundane methods of the Shwegyin include practices such as communal recitation of Pali texts, reflection on the various unwholesome attributes of the body, or the chanting of protective prayers. Such practices do not require preliminary work and study in the same way as *vipassanā* meditation, nor do they require as intimate a teacher-student relationship or a specially built centre of activity. Houtman describes the kinds of practices purveyed by the Shwegyin as “linguistic play” (Houtman 1990b, 237). While he uses the term “play” cautiously, the Shwegyin might agree, because it was precisely these lower-level, less effective but less potentially harmful practices that he thought were suitable for both lay people

and monastics not familiar with meditation.¹⁷⁰ Perhaps the Shwegyin believed that *vipassanā* was a practice to be reserved only for monastic, and even then, only for advanced, virtuoso monks.

The revolutionary move by the Mingun Jetavana was thus to open up the teachings of *vipassanā* to both monks and lay people of both genders, regardless of their intellect or past experience. Though moral discipline and Buddhist cultural awareness were requirements, the site of the meditation centre was a means to overcome the difficulties of the householder life, providing lay practitioners a chance to live like monastics while immersed in their *vipassanā* training. This innovation of the Mingun Jetavana and his disciples has had profound consequences for the practice of meditation, not just in Burma, but worldwide. Writing in 1994, Cousins confirms that “[l]eaving aside forms of Buddhist meditation which have their roots in Northern or Eastern Buddhism, almost all commercially published accounts of meditation by Buddhist (and non-Buddhist) practitioners are derived from some branch of Burmese insight meditation, and usually from one of two branches of that” (Cousins 1994, 36). In this way, the Mingun Jetavana reimagined the role of the lay devotee and unlocked their potential for practice. Hence towards the end of the Mingun Jetavana’s life, “[b]y the time Burma regained independence from Britain in 1948[,] the *vipassanā* ‘insight’ meditation movement had become thoroughly institutionalized and integrated into the orthodox Theravāda establishment” (Pranke 2010, 453–54).

¹⁷⁰ Certain meditation practices are considered harmful without the guidance of a teacher or proper preliminary work, such as keeping the moral precepts for a definite period, because they can lead the practitioner into states of mind that are difficult to emerge from or can reveal deeper neuroses that require expert guidance to overcome. However, it is recognised in certain traditions that these “adverse reactions” are in fact an integral part of the process and represent instead progress on the path (Skilton, Crosby, and Pyi Phyo Kyaw 2019, 15). See Pyi Phyo Kyaw (2019) for more on this issue in the Sunlun meditation tradition.

4.4 Mingun Jetavana's Method of Meditation

At the core of this meditation movement, and at heart of the Mingun Jetavana's own method, is the concept of *sati*. Often translated as “mindfulness,” the Mingun Jetavana bases his understanding of this term on the scheme found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas* mentioned above. The *satipaṭṭhāna*, or “foundations of mindfulness,” are fourfold, divided according to the object on which the mind, or rather one's attention, is directed. These objects consist of the body (P. *kāya*), feelings (P. *vedanā*), the mind itself (P. *citta*), and the *dhammas*. Bhikkhu Anālayo offers for this last term, which usually has the sense of mental objects, a more nuanced rendering, including “mental factors and categories,” since it is not just the mental objects, but the broader conceptual frameworks they belong to that becomes the object of *sati*, including doctrinal categories such as the Four Noble Truths (Anālayo 2006, 183). There is an illustrative example of how the Mingun Jetavana understands *sati* in the Mil-a, where he links proper *sati* (P. *sammāsati*) with the concept of *manasikāra*, which can be translated as “awareness,” “consideration,” or “mental advertence.” The idea is not just being aware of an object, but the proper application of awareness to an appropriate object:

In the eighth [question], “the characteristic of paying attention (*ūhanalakkhaṇa*)” means the characteristic of apprehending [an object]. “The characteristic of severing” means the characteristic of abandoning [the defilements]. As one puts the mind with the characteristic of paying attention of thought (*vitakkassa*) on an object (*ārammaṇe*), one does not put the mind with the characteristic of accumulation of attention (*manasikāra*) on an object [in the same way]. And Indeed [for] the practitioner of yoga [i.e., the meditator], [their] mind having grasped with (*manasikārena*) the recognition of the object, just in this recognition of the object in terms of the mind, one cuts off the defilements gradually, according to just the wisdom of *vipassanā* and the wisdom of the path. [At this stage] it is said [that the defilements] are abandoned.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ *aṭṭhame ūhanalakkhaṇo ti gahaṇalakkhaṇo/ chedanalakkhaṇo ti pahānalakkhaṇo/ yathā vitakkassa lakkhaṇaṃ ūhanaṃ ārammaṇe cittaṃ āropeti/ na tathā manasikāraṇa lakkhaṇaṃ ūhanaṃ ārammaṇe cittaṃ āropeti/ api ca kho yogāvacarō manasikārena ārammaṇavijānanaṃ mānaṣaṃ gaheṭvā ārammaṇavijānane tasmim̐ yeva mānaṣe anukkamena vipassanāpaññāya ceva maggapaññāya ca kilese chindati/ pahīyatī ti vuttaṃ hoti* (Mil-a 85,²⁹-86,²)

Note how the Mingun Jetavana glosses the word “*ūhanalakkhaṇa*,” the ‘characteristic of apprehension.’ He explains that it is like one “put[ting] (*aropeti*) the mind with a characteristic of *manasikāra* onto an object (*ārammaṇe*).” It is a vivid and tangible image, that of placing a mind heavy with attention onto an object, implying the importance of mental activity as the compounded “*manasikāra*” indicates (“*manasi*” as mind plus “*kāra*” as doing).¹⁷² In explaining the characteristic mark of *manasikāra* in the root text, Nāgasena first offers the simile of one reaping barley, which strongly suggests a kind of mental kinesis and involves grasping and heaping up the barley in the hand. In this simile, the barley represents the appropriate object of awareness, which for the Mingun Jetavana, consists of the four divisions of the *satipaṭṭhāna* scheme, namely, body, feelings, the mind, and the *dhammas*. When teaching *vipassanā*, the Mingun Jetavana and those of his lineage focused primarily on objects of the body, or in the phrasing of the *Satipaṭṭhāna suttas*, contemplation of the body (P. *kāyānupassanā*) (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 34). Houtman comments that the Mahasi introduced above, perhaps the most prominent of the Mingun Jetavana’s students, believed that contemplation on the body was the easiest for practitioners to grasp, while in general, it was believed “to be the most convenient and appropriate for this era” (Houtman 1990b, 17). Within the category of contemplation of the body, there are six subcategories, and Tikkhacara explains that the Mingun Jetavana chiefly taught his pupils, both lay and monastic, *sati* of bodily positions (P. *iriyāpatha*) and *sati* of clear comprehension (P. *sampajañña*) (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 34). Let us now explore

¹⁷² U Pu and other translators do get at this connotation, but the first English translator of the Mil, Rhys Davids, seems to overlook this sense. Rhys Davids translates this sentence as “[r]easoning has always comprehension as its mark” (Mil trans. Rhys Davids 1890b, I:51), which is overly intellectualized, a pattern of the early translations of Pali texts into European languages. Upon reading Rhys Davids’ rendering, one gets the impression that *manasikāra* is like a René Descartes figure meditating on the *cogito ergo sum* alone in their study.

these two techniques of the Mingun Jetavana to get a better sense of what he understands by proper *sati*.



Figure 5 The walkway and chair of the Mingun Jetavana preserved at one of his meditation centres in Myanmar. Photograph taken by the author in 2019.

According to the Mingun Jetavana in his *Nibbāna-kathā* introduced above, “[t]here are three [types of] bodily postures (*iriyāpatha*), namely, great postures (*mahāiriyāpatha*), middle postures (*majjhimāiriyāpatha*), and small postures (*khuddakairiyāpatha*)” (Nibb-k trans. Tin Mg Myint 2019b, 4).¹⁷³ The great postures consist of walking, standing, sitting, and lying down, and as per his technique, these postures become the object of *sati*. The Mingun Jetavana makes this point explicit when he says that the act of “going [i.e. walking] is the object to be observed, the observing mind notes the [act of] going [walking], and this observation leads to *sati*” (Nibb-k trans. Tin Mg Myint 2019b, 3).¹⁷⁴

Figure 5 is a photograph of the Mingun Jetavana’s personal residence at one of his meditation centres in Burma and captures the essence of this technique. The extended walkway was built in part for his walking meditation routine, while the chair at the end of the walkway is for the practice of the *sati* of the sitting position. Behind the viewer is his bedroom, where he was able

¹⁷³ Mingun Jetavana (1956, 302)

¹⁷⁴ Mingun Jetavana (1956, 300)

to practice the *sati* of lying down, while he could presumably stand in any of these spots to exercise his *sati* of standing. The architecture of his personal dwelling thus reflects the style of meditation the Mingun Jetavana purveyed.

Moving from the *sati* of the bodily postures to the *sati* of clear comprehension (P. *sampajañña*), the resolution of the postures becomes finer. One can actually be aware of not just walking, but the desire to walk. Yet is it necessary to understand that it is not the intention of walking in the future that can be a proper object for *vipassanā* practice, nor the recollection of walking that has already occurred. The Mingun Jetavana explains why:

Although it was noted as going [i.e. walking], the posture (*iriyāpatha*) of going has not yet occurred. That is why it is not *vipassanā*. When there is an urge to go, with the power of this urge, before going, one considers whether it is appropriate to go to this place or not. Then it [the mind] discards the idea if it is not suitable and follows it if it is suitable. This is clear comprehension of what is beneficial (*sappāya sampajañña*). (Nibb-k trans. Tin Mg Myint 2019b, 5)¹⁷⁵

The key word here is “beneficial” (P. *sappāya*), which explains why the contemplation on the stages of decay of a corpse advocated by the Shwegyin in the nineteenth century is an advantageous (P. *sāttaka*) practice from the viewpoint of Theravada Buddhism, but is not a technique of *vipassanā per se*. One is supposed to realise that the stages of decay of a corpse will also be their own fate one day, developing detachment to the body and the accompanying sensual pleasures. However, one is not actually contemplating one’s own corpse at this moment, hence the object is merely a sign (P. *nimitta*), or representation of what will happen. It is only when one is contemplating an object that actually exists in the moment, that this object can be the basis for *vipassanā* practice. Hence “only at the moment of going [walking] is it a clear comprehension of an object (*gocara-sampajañña*). This is definitely and truly *vipassanā*. Why? It was not real

¹⁷⁵ Mingun Jetavana (1956, 304)

before going. It was not real after going. At the moment of [actually] going, observing the posture (*iriyāpatha*) of going objectively as ‘going’ is truly and definitely *vipassanā*” (Nibb-k trans. Tin Mg Myint 2019b, 6).¹⁷⁶ Indeed, according to Panyacekka, out of the six subcategories of contemplation on the body in the *Satipaṭṭhāna suttas*, the Mingun Jetavana considered that “only three—contemplation on posture, attention and element—was taught by the Buddha for insight meditation practice but the rest of the meditation subjects in body contemplation are just described for samatha (tranquility) meditation” (Panyacekka 2016, n.p.).

According to the *sati* of clear comprehension in the *Satipaṭṭhāna suttas*, these postures can be nuanced with even further detail. For the posture of walking, there is both momentary going forward and momentary returning. This fact leads the Mingun Jetavana to subscribe meticulous methods of practice:

At the moment of going and at the moment of returning, [note the act of] striding with your left leg, observe the striding as observed; [note the act of] striding with your right leg, observe the striding as observed. During each stride, when the foot rises momentarily, [note] the rising, observe the rising as observed... When the foot momentarily presses the ground, [note the] pressing, observe the pressing as observed. These will be registered in one’s mind (*citta*). (Nibb-k trans. Tin Mg Myint 2019b, 4)¹⁷⁷

The prescribed practice above seems excessively mundane and removed from what one might imagine as a profound practice of meditation. Yet one of the innovations of the Mingun Jetavana was to explain his technique “in detail and in daily language” (Bio trans. Hla Myint Tikkhācāra [1957] 2019, 30), which was not always met with approval. In a series of extraordinary statements, the Mingun Jetavana’s first biographer, Tikkhacara, describes how regardless of the amount of “effort he put in teaching the dhamma, the way he taught was very foreign and

¹⁷⁶ Mingun Jetavana (1956, 305)

¹⁷⁷ Mingun Jetavana (1956, 303)

unsatisfying to his relatives (probably because he did not use scriptural terms)” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 30). In a biting exchange, Tikkhacara recalls how certain people, even the Mingun Jetavana’s own relatives, “made fun of his teaching by mimicking him thus, ‘Note, ‘going, going,’ when going; ‘eating, eating,’ when eating; ‘swallowing, swallowing,’ when swallowing; ‘choking, choking, when choking; ‘patting, patting,’ when patting; ‘pinching, pinching,’ when pinching” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 30). Given the social currency of vipassanā, such mimicry would be out of place in Burma today, but this anecdote reveals how radical the Mingun Jetavana’s teaching was in the first decades of the twentieth century, *sensu* Cam rhanh, when audiences were accustomed to hearing Pali-laden sermons that they probably did not understand directly, nor were they expected to understand them. Having a monk locate the path to *nibbāna* in the simple act of observing the bodily postures must have seemed strange indeed, especially when that monk was explaining this method in the vernacular, rather than the Pali language. Tikkhacara mentions that even

[s]ome pāli scholars young and old—analyzing and judging Min-gone Sayādawji’s empirical knowledge from scriptural point of view—stood up for those who were all talks, and made a mockery of his method with such heavy sarcasm as follows: “Dhamma is all about noting.” “Dhamma is to note bending and stretching.” “Noting is the dhamma that leads to *magga*, *phala* and *nibbāna*.” “Vipassanā is just to note.” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 68)

The lack of Pali terminology would have been especially alarming to monastic scholars, whose very vocation would have been perceived as under threat by this strange monk speaking about “bending and stretching” to lay people as the highest teaching of the Buddha. It also meant that any teaching would not be filtered through them or their specialised knowledge, and thus beyond their ability to regulate, control, or censor if necessary.

4.5 *Vipassanā-ñāṇa* (Knowledge of Insight)

To understand why the act of being aware of the bodily postures leads to the development of *vipassanā* in the Mingun Jetavana’s method, or rather, to the knowledge of insight (P. *vipassanā-ñāṇa*), consider again the metaphor in the Mil offered by Nāgasena above. Reaping barley has two components: grasping the barley in one hand and cutting it with the other. This second act, of cutting the accumulated barley, is crucial to appreciate the importance of *manasikāra*, and is what the Mingun Jetavana means when he states above that “[a]s one puts the mind with the characteristic of paying attention of thought (*vitakkassa*) on an object (*ārammaṇe*), one does not put the mind with the characteristic of accumulation of attention (*manasikārassa*) on an object [in the same way]”¹⁷⁸. In this formulation, “the yogi [practitioner],” as opposed to the untrained individual, is exercising *manasikāra* as opposed to mere *vitakka*, or thought. The distinction is due to the practitioner yoking their accumulation of *manasikāra* with what the Mingun Jetavana calls the “knowledge of *vipassanā*’ (*vipassanā ñāṇa*),” which can be understood as insight into the mortal nature of personal existence. Hence merely drawing one’s thought to an object does not suffice as *manasikāra*, but rather, placing one’s attention onto an object vis-à-vis its true nature is paramount. There are at least two levels to practicing proper *sati* according to the Mingun Jetavana: one is second-order *sati*, and the other is the constant, pulsating reapplication of Buddhist doctrine while exercising this *sati*. The necessity of second-order *sati* is explained as follows: “by progressing another step in wisdom, it is noted that the former mind that observed the [act of] going is [itself] observed by the *vipassanā* mind” (Nibb-k trans. Tin Mg Myint

¹⁷⁸ *yathā vitakkassa lakkhaṇaṃ ūhanaṃ ārammaṇe cittaṃ āropeti/ na tathā manasikārassa lakkhaṇaṃ ūhanaṃ ārammaṇe cittaṃ āropeti* (Mil-a 86,³⁰⁻³²)

2019b, 3).¹⁷⁹ In this formulation, it is not so much the object of the four postures that is the basis of *vipassanā*, but the observation of the object itself, the previous mind in the mental series. That is, it is the awareness of awareness that is crucial. Though discussing a separate set of possible objects, Panyacekka comments on the second-order nature of the Mingun Jetavana’s method by claiming that “[i]f meditated in this way, not only visible form but also eye-consciousness that is recognizing the form is also separately realized while seeing sight [i.e., a visible object]. This is actual insight knowledge” (Panyacekka 2016, npg.). The reason this second-order quality is so crucial to the Mingun Jetavana’s method is because it allows one to discriminate between the activity of physical and mental forms (*P. nāma rūpa pariccheda*). For example, the act of walking is a physical form, while the act of observing the said posture is a mental form. Both must be recognized, and they must be consistently recognized as distinct. The dynamic between physical forms (*P. rūpa*) and mental forms (*P. nāma*) constitutes the individual in Theravada doctrine, but it is not enough to learn this through texts or from the mouth of another—even a Buddha. For the Mingun Jetavana, like Caṃ rhañḥ above, one must experience this dynamic themselves, thus the importance of the *sati* of bodily postures.

The second aspect of Theravada doctrine that must be directly realised builds on the dynamic of physical and mental forms, namely, the nature of individual existence. The nature of individual existence is directly referenced multiple times in the *Mil*, but one especially relevant question is when Milinda asks Nāgasena “O Venerable Nāgasena, does the arising of knowledge (*ñāṇa*) in one cause the arising also of Wisdom (*paññā*)?” (*Mil* trans. Pu [1983] 2006, 84).

“Knowledge” might not be the most precise translation of “*ñāṇa*” for this context, since “*ñāṇa*”

¹⁷⁹ Mingun Jetavana (1956, 303)

is often translated as wisdom as well; Nāgasena affirms this equivocation, since he claims that “knowledge itself is Wisdom” (Mil trans. Pu [1983] 2006, 92). Later in this same question, when discussing this wisdom, Nāgasena clarifies that it arises for the *yogāvacara*, one who is practicing spiritual exercises. According to Rhys Davids’ translation, he renders *yogāvacara* as “the recluse devoted to effort” (Mil trans. Rhys Davids 1890b, I:68). In a lengthy footnote, Rhys Davids admits that “*yogāvacara*” is another “one of the technical terms in constant use by our author [of the Mil], but not found in the Pāli *Pitakas*,” rejecting a previous translation of this term as one ‘who is seeking nirvana’ (Rhys Davids 1890b, I:68). He goes on to claim that “the whole compound merely means one of those ‘religious,’ in the more technical sense, who were also religious in the higher, more usual sense” (Rhys Davids 1890b, I:68). U Pu comes closer to what this “technical sense” is, for the Mingun Jetavana, when he translates “*yogāvacara*” as the “individual who is practicing (meditation) Mind Development” (Pu [1983] 2006, 95), but “meditation” and “Mind Development” are still not very precise, possibly referencing either *samatha* or *vipassanā* techniques. For the Mingun Jetavana, explicating this passage in his Mil-a, there is no doubt about the meaning of “*yogāvacara*.”

In the third [question], when the king said “for one who” means for one who carries out the practice of meditation. “Knowledge has arisen” means knowledge has arisen on account of *vipassanā*, or with the path leading to *vipassanā* (*vipassanāgamanamaggena*). “For that one” means for that one who carries out the practice of meditation. “Wisdom has arisen” means wisdom has arisen on account of *vipassanā*, or with the path leading to *vipassanā* (*vipassanāgamanamaggena*).¹⁸⁰

Again, the Mingun Jetavana is picking up references already found in the root text but is making explicit what these terms mean according to his own understanding, foreclosing on other possible

¹⁸⁰ *tatiye rājā āha/ yassā ti yassa yogāvacarassa ñāṇaṃ uppannaṃ ti vipassanāvasena vā vipassanāgamanamaggena vā ñāṇaṃ uppannaṃ/ tassā ti tassa yogāvacarassa/ paññā uppannā ti vipassanāvasena vā (96) vipassanāgamanamaggena vā paññā uppannā* (Mil-a 95,^{31-96,1})

readings. The *yogāvacara* is not one who recites the name of the Buddha, practices austerities, or even enters the *jhānic* states, but is exclusively one who practices techniques of *vipassanā* directed towards *paññā*. Though the word “*vipassanā*” does occur a handful of times in the Mil, including in connection with “*magga*” (“the path”) and “*samatha*” (“calming meditation”), nowhere in this particular question is the phrase “according to the path leading to *vipassanā*” (P. *vipassanāgamanamaggena*)’ mentioned, a compound which is not attested to anywhere in the Tipiṭaka narrowly defined. Moreover, it is far from certain that the term “*vipassanā*” meant the same to the early reciters or compilers of the Mil as it does to the Mingun Jetavana, thus his reading might be an interpolation into the root text revising Buddhist practice history in support of his own method of meditation.

Nāgasena proceeds to explain the difference between mere conventional knowledge (P. *ñāṇa*) and specifically Buddhist wisdom (P. *paññā*). The person with *ñāṇa* accumulates specific facts about words, place names, foreign custom, or perhaps, the stages of decay of a corpse. Just like one who directs their mere thought (P. *vitakka*) to an object without *manasikāra*, expertise about a field of knowledge does not equate to the higher sense of *paññā* denoted in Milinda’s question here. Yet for a person with such *paññā*, though they may mis-remember the name of this tree or commit grammatical mistakes, the characteristics of personal existence are not forgotten. Both Nāgasena and the Mingun Jetavana are clear what these characteristics are, namely, *anicca* (“impermanence”), *dukkha* (“existential unsatisfactoriness”), and *anatta* (“non-self”),¹⁸¹ but the Mingun Jetavana claims they are grasped only by one practicing *vipassanā*

¹⁸¹ In terms of translation, “*anicca*” can be rendered as the inherent impermanence of compounded objects, phenomena, and beings, that is, impermanence; “*dukkha*” is often translated as “suffering,” but more accurately, is the existential dis-ease at the heart of the human condition resulting from this impermanence, the discontented asymptote or every achieving a final mundane happiness; “*anatta*” could be rendered as both “non-self,” in the sense

techniques: “when *paññā* thus arises in only the one who practices meditation with the path conducive to *vipassanā* or on account of *vipassanā*, by that *paññā* it is done, [namely, that] one understands the characteristic[s] “impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), non-self (*anatta*).” When the[se] characteristic[s] have been previously understood, *paññā* has done its specific purpose (*sakiccayam*).”¹⁸² Thus, only when *sati* is connected with and directed towards the understanding—the direct experiencing—of these three characteristics, is it proper *vipassanā* according to the Mingun Jetavana.

To grasp the role *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta* play in the system of the Mingun Jetavana, recourse will be made to his 1922 text, *Nibbān lamḥ ññvan*. Referring to the act of seeing, the Mingun Jetavana explains that with proper *sati* connected to *vipassanā*, “when there is momentary seeing, if one observes that one is seeing, then one knows truthfully that the eye is impermanent, the image is impermanent, the consciousness is impermanent, the experience is impermanent, and the feeling of the image is impermanent”(Nibb-l trans. Tin Mg Myint 2019a, 6).¹⁸³ Realising the impermanence of this psycho-somatic series is the first step in the path of *vipassanā*, but what does this impermanence entail? According to the Mingun Jetavana, the recognition of *anicca* leads to the next characteristic: “When there is momentary seeing, if one observes the seeing, and registers this seeing as harmful, then one truthfully knows that the eye is

of a lack of a substantial personal entity, but also as “non-sovereignty,” in the sense that beings have no true control over their own mortality, even over everyday actions and reactions

¹⁸² *paññā pi vipassanāvasena vā vipassanāgamanamaggena vā yatthā yogāvacare yeva uppannā/ tāya paññāya kataṃ aniccaṃ dukkhaṃ anattā ti lakkhaṇaṃ upaṭṭhāti/ upaṭṭhite pana lakkhaṇe pubbabhāge paññā sakiccayam katvā* (Mil-a 97,¹⁰⁻¹³).

¹⁸³ မြင်သောခဏ မြင်တယ်လု. မှတ်လျှင် မြင်ကုန်တယ်လို့ ထင်သောသူမှာ မျက်စိလဲမမြဲ, အဆင်းလဲမမြဲ, မြင်တာလဲ မမြဲ, တွေ့တာလဲ မမြဲ, ခံစားတာလဲ မမြဲဟု ဟုတ် တိုင်း မုန် စွာ သိတာဘဲလို့ (Mingun Jetavana [1922] 1973, 7)

harmful, the image is harmful, the consciousness is harmful, the experience is harmful, and the feeling of the image is harmful” (Nibb-I trans. Tin Mg Myint 2019a, 7).¹⁸⁴ By “harmful” the Mingun Jetavana is referring to *dukkha*, the inherent un-satisfactoriness of personal existence. It is not so much that the eye organ is harmful, nor the consciousness of the eye object, but the attachment to the eye organ and the attachment to the consciousness of the eye object, such that one identifies with these physical and mental forms, which given their fleeting nature, causes distress and despair at their inevitable loss. Another way to put this idea is that human suffering is caused by seeing the impermanent as permanent, seeing the harmful as helpful. Yet the import of *dukkha* is ultimately the final and most critical characteristic, that of *anatta*: “When there is momentary seeing, if one observes that one is seeing, and registers that this seeing has ceased, then one truthfully knows that the eye is not under one’s control, the image is not under one’s control, the consciousness is not under one’s control, the experience is not under one’s control, and the feeling of the image is not under one’s control” (Nibb-I trans. Tin Mg Myint 2019a, 8).¹⁸⁵ The point of *vipassanā* practice then according to the Mingun Jetavana is to realise for oneself that there is no control of the body, over the mind, and ultimately, no control over one’s inevitable death.

¹⁸⁴ မြင်သော ခဏ မြင်, မြင်ယေလို့. မှတ်လျှင် မြင်ဘေးလို့. ထင်သောသူမှာ မျက်စိလဲ ဆင်းရဲ၊ အဆင်းလဲ ဆင်းရဲ၊ မြင်တာလဲ ဆင်းရဲ၊ တွေ့တာလဲ ဆင်းရဲ၊ ခံစားတာလဲ ဆင်းရဲဟု ဟုတ်တိုင်း မှန်စွာ သိတာဘဲလို့ (Mingun Jetavana [1922] 1973, 11)

¹⁸⁵ မြင်သောခဏ မြင်, မြင်တယ်လို့. မှတ်လျှင် မြင်ဆိတ်တယ်လို့ ထင်သောသူမှာ မျက်စိလဲ အစိုးမရ၊ အဆင်းလဲ အစိုးမရ၊ မြင်တာလဲ အစိုးမရ၊ တွေ့တာလဲ အစိုးမရ၊ ခံစားတာလဲ အစိုးမရဟု ဟုတ်တိုင်း မှန်စွာ သိတာဘဲလို့ (Mingun Jetavana [1922] 1973, 12–13)

Yet the thrust of *anatta* goes one step further in the Mingun Jetavana’s system, especially when combined with the understanding of physical (P. *rūpa*) and mental (P. *nāma*) forms mentioned above. Returning to his *Nibbāna-kathā*, the Mingun Jetavana specifies the difference between one applying mere thought (P. *vitakka*) to an object without *vipassanā*, and one applying *manasikāra* informed by *vipassanā* to an object, whether that object be a visible form, a posture, or the act of *manasikāra* itself:

At the moment of noting during the period of attention (*javana*), ordinary foolish (*andhabāla*) beings, [who are] like foxes and dogs, only concentrate on the object[s] of defilements (*kilesa*), [such as] “being,” and the ongoing [process of] physical and mental forms (*nāma rūpa*) registers as: individual, a being, I, him, [her,] man, woman and the like. They do not register as object[s] of consciousness (*viññāṇa*), [for there is] no analysis of physical and mental forms (*nāma rūpa*), and [their understanding] is not *vipassanā*. (Nibb-k trans. Tin Mg Myint 2019b, 12)¹⁸⁶

Thus, one without proper *vipassanā*, even if they are applying their accumulated thought to an explicitly Buddhist object, like the decay of corpses or the qualities of the Buddha, is still operating within the concept and framework of the self, with an underlying linguistic and ontological substratum of “I am,” “this is me,” “that is mine.” Exercises such as chanting protective prayers and reciting Pali sutras are advantageous (P. *sāttḥaka*) in a religious context but do not constitute techniques of *vipassanā* as taught by the Mingun Jetavana. In contrast,

at the moment of noting during the period of attention (*javana*), the yogi [or yogini] who practices *vipassanā* only concentrates on the ongoing [process of] physical and mental forms (*nāma rūpa*), which is the object of consciousness (*viññāṇa*). [The yogi and yogini] note mental form as mental form and analyze physical form as physical form. [They] do not register the object[s] of defilements (*kilesa*), there is an analysis of and mental and physical forms (*nāma rūpa*), and [this understanding] is *vipassanā*. (Nibb-k trans. Tin Mg Myint 2019b, 12)¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Found at Mingun Jetavana (1956, 327).

¹⁸⁷ Mingun Jetavana (1956, 327–28)

Thus, for the yogi or yoginī, there is a realisation that outside of mental and physical forms, nothing else exists. When the practitioner of *vipassanā* applies their accumulated *manasikāra* to an object, they do so without the framework of the self, or at least attempt as much. “At this point,” the Mingun Jetavana explains,

one reaches the height of the knowledge to discriminate mental and physical form (*nāma-rūpa-pariccheda-ñāṇa*). Only mental and physical forms [thus] register in one’s consciousness. The view of the concept of being (*satta saññā ditṭhi*) is abolished. The knowledge that analyses the [process of] mental and physical forms operates continuously. Mental and physical forms register consistently day and night. The concept of being disappears (*satta-saññā*). (Nibb-k trans. Tin Mg Myint 2019b, 12)¹⁸⁸

As explained by Nāgasena in the above question, even though one might eventually discard the practice of *vipassanā* like five pots of water thrown on a burning house, the recognition that there is no such entity as a being from the ultimate standpoint endures, with the fire of ignorance extinguished.

4.6 *Vipassanā* and *Samatha*

Before moving on to the final section, one question remains: what is the relationship between the techniques of *samatha* and *vipassanā* in the Mingun Jetavana’s system? Generally speaking, it is usually considered that Theravada meditation consists of two main branches, those aimed at the calming of the passions of the mind through the practice of *samatha* (“tranquility”) and those practices rooted in the development of *paññā* (“wisdom”) through the practice of *vipassanā*. *Samatha* and *vipassanā* are thus chiefly defined by their different goals: while *vipassanā* techniques are meant to lead to the *paññā* that abolishes the sense of self described above, *samatha* aims to achieve a state of concentration and one-pointedness of mind (P. *ekaggatā*) and

¹⁸⁸ Mingun Jetavana (1956, 328)

is characterized by the constant application of cogitation to one of 40 objects, like the inhalation and exhalation of breath (P. *ānāpāna*), the stages of decay of a corpse (P. *asubha*), the primary colors and basic elements (P. *kasiṇa*), or on recalling the qualities of the Buddha (P. *buddhānussati*).¹⁸⁹ The development of a state of mental tranquility through *samatha* eventually leads to an all-encompassing and constant awareness of meditation objects that fills one’s mental realm in its entirety, such that one’s mind is able to focus on a singular point without wavering. After one has honed their attention to a singular point and can sustain this attention indefinitely, and provided one has overcome, at least temporarily, the five hindrances (P. *pañca-nīvaraṇāni*),¹⁹⁰ it is possible to enter into the *jhānas* (S: *dhyāna*, ཏཱ་ཤྱ་ཤྱ་ཤྱ་ཤྱ་ཤྱ་ *jhān*), what I translate as “states of total absorption.” Tin Than Myint describes these states in figurative terms, claiming that “the mind reaches a state as if it were alive and sinks consciously into the object and remains fixed in it” (Tin Than Myint 2008, 9). It is through the *jhānas*, which constitute a “hierarchically structured series” (Griffiths 1981, 609), that human beings unlock the *abhiññās* (“higher forms of knowledge”), such that they can levitate, see distant objects with divine eyes, and read other’s minds. These *jhānas*, at least by adherents of modern, reform *vipassanā* meditation, are not considered as necessary components of the orthodox Buddhist path.¹⁹¹ It is generally accepted

¹⁸⁹ There is in the Tipiṭaka and the *aṭṭhakathās* a certain bivalency to these practices, meaning that in some contexts, they too can lead to the development of *paññā*. For instance, *ānāpāna* meditation is often presented as a tool of *samatha*, since it can easily calm the mind, yet the nature of the breath and the fact that each one could be our last is said to develop insight into the impermanence of our fragile, individual existence. As we will see below, even for the Mingun Jetavana, the same object can be used for either *samatha* or *vipassanā* meditation.

¹⁹⁰ These five hindrances consist of lust and sensual desire (P. *kāmacchanda*), ill-will (P. *vyāpāda*), sloth and torpor (P. *thīna-middha*), restlessness and worry (*uddhacca-kukucca*), and doubt (P. *vicikiccha*).

¹⁹¹ *Samatha* cultivation does, however, constitute an integral part of the path of the so-called Buddhist wizard, known as the “ဝိဇ္ဇာလမ်း *vijjā lamḥ*,” and other ritual specialists in contemporary Burma who operate at varying levels of “distance from the core of” Theravada convention (Brac de la Perrière 2012, 104). Their practices are infused with a host of mosaic, contrapuntal techniques and goals that incorporate various forms of *samatha*

that forms of meditation that utilize techniques of *vipassanā* do not aim to achieve the *jhānas* nor the *abhiññās*. Rather, as Cam rhañḥ pointed out in the newspaper article above, practitioners of *vipassanā* seek to directly realize the axiomatic doctrines of Theravada Buddhism themselves, to “see” the Buddha’s teachings directly and thereby develop a sort of experiential *paññā*, or wisdom.

The neat division described above, however, is partly an artefact of the modern, reform movement of *vipassanā* itself, which tries to distance its practice from earlier forms of meditation that involve aspects that cannot be framed as psychological or positivistic, such as the *jhānas* and their attendant, supernatural *abhiññās* (Crosby 2020, 17). To this point, Skilton et al. identify the cleavage between *vipassanā* techniques and techniques of *samatha* as a “division [that] continues as a trope in presentations of Theravada meditation, including early meditation, in contemporary discourse” (Skilton, Crosby, and Pyi Phyo Kyaw 2019, 3). This trope has major consequences for the field at large and the training of generations of scholars. Referring to source material in Sanskrit and Pali, David Fiordalis claims that “the distinction between calm (*śamatha*) and insight (*vipaśyanā*) has shaped contemporary descriptions of (and prescriptions for) Buddhist practice, including meditation practice, and the ostensibly related dichotomies continue to influence modern scholarly understandings of Buddhist doctrine, theory, and history” (Fiordalis 2019, 22). Putting the debate in Buddhist Studies aside, it is helpful for our discussion to approach the relationship between *samatha* and *vipassanā* from the perspective of praxis-based communities in Burma. The method of the Ledi, for example, is another major lineage of *vipassanā* practice. This method is known as “*samathayānika vipassanā*,” or the “*vipassanā* of

cultivation, including what could be variously termed magic, medicine, statecraft, or even, as Niklas Foxeus writes, cosmic warfare (Foxeus 2014, 85).

one who has [first] acquired *samatha*,” a technique that leads to the calming of the mind. The Ledi’s method is also known as “*yuganaddha*,” since it harmonizes both *vipassanā* and *samatha*, or rather, one can alternate according to the situation and their personal development.¹⁹² The prescription in this technique is to practice “concentration as a separate activity using specifically concentration techniques before ‘crossing over to WM’ [*vipassanā*]” (Houtman 1990b, 188). Many of the modern adherents of this technique, like the Mohnyin, Saya Thet Gyi, and U Ba Khin (ဦးဗခင် ။ Ba khañ, 1899-1971) (Houtman 1990b, 282) the first Accountant General of the independence government of Burma, and the Webu Sayadaw (ဝေဘူဆရာတော် Ve bhū Cha rā tau, a.k.a., ဦးကုမာရ ။ Kumāra 1898-1977 (Tin Than Myint 2008, ix)), based their teachings on the *sati* of in-and-out breath (P. *anāpānasati*), a concentration technique which they believe is necessary to practice before moving onto the development of *vipassanā*.

In contrast, the technique pioneered by the Mingun Jetavana is considered by his followers as “*suddha-vipassanāyānika*” (Tin Than Myint 2008, 8), or the method of “mastering pure *vipassanā*,” because it supposedly does not mix itself with *samatha* techniques or aim towards “simple” calming of the mind. According to Panyacekka, the Mingun Jetavana, the Mahasi, Mogoke Sayadaw (မိုးကုတ်ဆရာတော် Muiḥ kut Cha rā tau, a.k.a., ဦးတိမလ ။ Vimala 1899-1962 (Tin Than Myint 2008, ix)), and Theinngu Sayadaw (သဲအင်းဂူဆရာတော် Sai aṅḥ gū

¹⁹² There is, in fact, a slight difference between *samathayānika vipassanā* and *yuganaddha* methods, in the sense that one who practices *samathayānika vipassanā* begins with *samatha*, or calming-techniques, but does not necessarily return to them after reaching a certain stage. This appears to be the style of Pa-Auk Saydaw (ဖားအောက်ဆရာတော် *Phāḥ āok Cha rā tau*, a.k.a., ဘဒ္ဒန္တအာစိန္တံ Bhaddanta āciṅṅa, 1934-Present), where *vipassanā* training is only reserved for the student at the very end of their training, which can possibly take years or even lifetimes. *Yuganaddha* methods, in contrast, stipulate that one can switch back and forth between *samatha* techniques and *vipassanā* with more flexibility, depending on the situation and the state of one’s mind. I have seen the Ledi’s technique described in both ways, or at least, there are examples of proponents of both methods tracing their teaching back to him.

Cha rā tau, a.k.a., ဦးဥက္ကဋ္ဌ ။ Ukkatṭha, 1913-1973 (Pyi Phyo Kyaw 2019, 247)), all “applied a mere pure insight meditation method” (Panyacekka 2016, n.p.). Others, like the Sunlun Sayadaw (စွန်းလွန်းဆရာတော် Cvanḥ Ivanḥ Cha rā tau, a.k.a., ဦးတိ ။ Kavi, 1878-1952 (Pyi Phyo Kyaw 2019, 247)), who can be considered as partially self-taught and without a strict lineage association, appears to have combined the style of the Ledi and the Mingun Jetavana, starting with the *sati* of the in-and-out-breath of the Ledi, and later, after meeting a pupil of the Mingun Jetavana, combining it with the “noting” technique mentioned above (Ariyajyoti 2016, n.p.). Both the Ledi and the Mingun Jetavana techniques prescribe that one does not need to acquire a state of total absorption in order to practice *vipassanā*. Cousins claims “that the possibility of omitting *jhāna* is reasonably well established in the *aṭṭhakathā* literature. Its ultimate source appears to lie in a particular interpretation of a passage in the *Paṭisambhidā-magga* (II, 92–103)” (Cousins 1994, 50), but this is contested by certain Sinhalese scholars monks, who “argue that it is not possible to achieve the stage of the transcendent path (*lokuttaramagga*) without having previously achieved at least the first *jhāna*” (Cousins 1994, 48). Downplaying the states of total absorption appears then to be an innovation of Burmese teachers, though as Cousins pointed out, they base their interpretation in the *aṭṭhakathā* literature of Buddhaghosa and others. All these techniques do maintain, according to Houtman, that “at least ‘access concentration’ must be achieved before ‘crossing over’. This is usually a mild type of concentration which need not lead up as far as the achievement of even the first [*jhāna*] (Houtman 1990b, 188). Even in the lineage of the Mahasi, which “is probably one of the more extreme in its advocacy of insight [*vipassanā*]

and distrust of concentration [*samatha*]” (Cousins 1994, 42), there is agreement with this idea, but the nature of this “access concentration” is hotly debated among the various methods.¹⁹³

Thus, it does not seem entirely accurate to depict the Mingun Jetavana as eschewing the role of *samatha* in his idea of the path to *nibbāna*. At least the distinction between *vipassanā* and *samatha* techniques needs to be more carefully nuanced. To end his *Nibbān lamḥ ññvan*, the Mingun Jetavana writes the following:

Practising the Noble Eightfold Path (*sacca-magga*) means that the knowledge of the path (*ñāṇa-magga*) is used to understand that there are no new acts of karma and defilements (*kilesas*) to generate the next existence (*bhāva*). This is *vipassanā*. The path of concentration (*samādhi-magga*) is tranquility (*samatha*). The pair of *samatha-vipassanā* (calmness-insight) prevent the [five] worldly aggregates [that constitute the individual] (*loki-khandha*), mental form (*nāma*) and physical form (*rūpa*) from proliferating latent defilements (*anusaya*) and spontaneous outbursts of defilements (*pariyutṭhāna-kilesas*). [Together] these are called the path (*magga*) of practising the Noble Eightfold Path (*sacca-magga*). (Nibb-I trans. Tin Mg Myint 2019a, 12)¹⁹⁴

In this statement, the Mingun Jetavana explicitly claims that the “pair of *samatha-vipassanā*” is necessary to progress on the “Noble Eightfold Path.” Indeed, it is the combination of the path of *paññā* through *vipassanā* and the path of concentration through *samatha* that leads to *nibbāna* according to the Mingun Jetavana.¹⁹⁵ When discussing the *aṭṭhakathā* on the *Āṅguttaranikāya*

¹⁹³ Houtman has a helpful discussion on this debate in his dissertation, Chapter III: Buddhist practice and the concept of person, pages 186-188.

¹⁹⁴ မဂ္ဂသစ္စာကို ပွားဆိုတဲ့ အဓိပ္ပါယ်က ဘဝတဖန် အသစ် ကံ, ကိလေသာ၏အကျိုးမဖြစ်ဟု ရှုမြင်သော မဂ်ပညာက ဝိသဿနာ၊ မင်္ဂလာဓိက သမထ၊ ဤသမထ-ဝိပဿနာ အစုံက လောကီ ခန္ဓာ, နာမ်, ရုပ်၌ အနုသယ, ပရိယုတ္တန် ကိလေသာမှ လွတ် သောကိစ္စ တူကြသည်ကို မဂ်က မဂ္ဂသစ္စာကို ပွားတယ်လို့ ဆိုရသတဲ့။ (Mingun Jetavana [1922] 1973, 21–22)

¹⁹⁵ There is, in fact, some confusion on the exact relationship between *samatha* and *samādhi* in the secondary literature. Part of the confusion lies in the large scope given to *samādhi* in the Tipiṭaka and *aṭṭhakathās*. Bhikkhu Anālayo, for example, writes that “[t]he discourses use the term ‘concentration’ (*samādhi*) in a surprisingly broad manner, relating it to walking meditation, for example, or to observing the arising and passing away of feelings and cognitions, or to contemplating the arising and passing away of the five aggregates” (Anālayo 2006, 70). He notes further that the “term ‘concentration’ (*samādhi*) is not restricted to the development of calm (*samatha*) only, but can also refer to the realm of insight meditation (*vipassanā*)” (Anālayo 2006, 70). In this quote Anālayo suggests that *samādhi* is used to develop *samatha*, yet in Routledge’s *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, David McMahan defines the

(*Collection of Numerical [Discourses]*) in the Suttapiṭaka, Fiordalis states that “the commentary relies on the concept of the path to connect the different paired concepts” of *samatha* and *vipassanā* (Fiordalis 2019, 43), which is what appears to be the strategy in the above statement of the Mingun Jetavana. Yet for someone like a teacher of “pure *vipassanā*,” the pair of *samatha* and *vipassanā* are not equal parts in the path, that is, one subsumes the other. Houtman explains that in this kind of relationship, “the development of concentration [is] in the context of specifically WM [*vipassanā*] techniques without a discrete break between the two activities, and without using standard concentration techniques” (Houtman 1990b, 188). Reframing *samatha* in the context of *vipassanā* is exactly what the Mingun Jetavana tried to do in the two meditation texts cited above, where *sati* is only proper *sati* when understood in the paradigm of *vipassanā*. In this sense, while *samatha* leads to calming the mind, its true force comes when it is paired with *vipassanā* and leads to *paññā*. This contextual move is what allowed the Mingun Jetavana to definitively translate words like “*yogavācāra*” in the Mil as “a practitioner of *vipassanā*,” whereas a less committed commentator might leave open the possibility that Nāgasena (or the author(s) behind this persona) had in mind techniques of both *samatha* and *vipassanā*, assuming Nāgasena would even recognize what is meant by the modern usage of these terms, since neither are found in the Suttapiṭaka (Gethin 2011, 273). The “approach” of the Mingun Jetavana “therefore proposes a hierarchical relationship between *samatha* and *vipassanā* meditation, since it is *vipassanā* that delivers the decisive insights of Buddhist enlightenment” (Crosby 2013, 13). It is in this “hierarchical relationship” that the proponents of the Mingun Jetavana can claim that

relationship between *samādhi* and *samatha* in an opposite manner, stating that *samatha* is that which “foster[s] calm, serenity, and one-pointed concentration (*samādhi*), in which discursive thought is brought to a minimum or eliminated” (McMahan [2007] 2010, 248). Avoiding these issues of hierarchy, it is perhaps easiest to understand *samatha* and *samādhi* as synonyms with overlapping but not isometric spheres of reference, as Nyanatiloka suggests in his *Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms & Doctrines* (Nyanatiloka [1952a] 1980, 292).

his method is “pure *vipassanā*,” even though it has obvious elements of *samatha*, as the Mingun Jetavana would readily admit. The method is pure because only through the overarching paradigm of *vipassanā* can one meaningfully practice *samatha* at all.

4.7 Meditation in the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*

In his 1999-transliterated edition of the Mil-a, Deshpande notes that the Mingun Jetavana appears to make “long digressions from the basic function of the commentary,” digressions that more often than not lead into the “canonical and commentarial traditions regarding meditative practices” (Deshpande 1999, 6–7). In other words, the Mingun Jetavana does not hesitate to interpret the root text in terms of his own preoccupations, which as we have seen above, are primarily focused on the theory and techniques of *vipassanā* meditation. His consistent reemphasis on meditation theory is one of the driving forces of the Mil-a and make this commentary a unique text. Rather than understanding these digressions as distracting asides, it is more apt to take them as moments where the Mingun Jetavana is following the methodology of the Peṭ and Nett (*Guiding Treatise*), the two Pali texts added to the Khuddakanikāya along with the Mil in the Fifth Burmese Council in the late-nineteenth century. Originally understood in early European scholarship to be commentaries themselves, as they contain a great deal of self-conscious citations from elsewhere in the Tipiṭaka (Ñāṇamoli [1962b] 1977, xlv), Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, the German-born translator of both texts in the late 1950s, convincingly argues that they are best understood as guides for would-be exegetes of texts from the Tipiṭaka (Ñāṇamoli [1962b] 1977, xliii), scholar monks who needed criteria for elucidating a given root text according to established interpretative principles (Ñāṇamoli [1962b] 1977, xliii). Put another way, these texts do not elucidate any specific root text but contain a set of principles furnished by

systematized examples for how exegetes should proceed in their own commentarial endeavors. In this sense, they are the explication of the principles of the Tipiṭaka itself, working in tandem with the six commentarial strategies reviewed in the last chapter to make clear the underlying unity of the Buddha’s teaching despite its motley and sometimes seemingly contradictory manifestations in language and writing.¹⁹⁶

The Peṭ and Nett present their methodology under two main headings, the first being the *hārā*, or modes of conveyance. These modes of conveyance, 16 in number, deal with the phrasing of the teachings themselves, and are said to be applicable to any passage in the Tipiṭaka. The point of these *hārās* is to enable the commentator to analyse the language of a given passage and recreate from this language the place of a given passage in the theoretical and doctrinal superstructure of the teachings as a whole, even if this role is not immediately apparent in the context or letter of the passage in question (Bodhi [1978a] 2007, 37). In other words, the *hārās* are meant to unravel how the individual and unique words, phrases, and their order of presentation in a given text are designed in such a way as to lead, or “carry” one away from ignorance and towards truth as putatively seen and articulated by the Buddha.¹⁹⁷ The assumption at play here is that while the unique phrasing of a specific text does not always explicitly invoke core concepts of the Buddha’s teaching, this invocation is ever-present on an implicit level, meaning that one only need to reverse engineer from these core concepts back to the words to

¹⁹⁶ Philip Vanhalemeersch cautions us that the unity of the Buddha’s teachings should not be taken for granted, but rather, are an axiom of the Theravada commentarial project. He writes that “the ideal of coherence does not only apply to the teachings of the Buddha as expressed in the words, the sentences and the texts they form. Coherence is as much a matter of the reader. Ideas are more likely to find a coherent expression in a certain text if we impose the criterium of coherence onto the text. Coherence also relates to the way we present and re-present the teachings of the Buddha” (Vanhalemeersch 2000, 314).

¹⁹⁷ The word “*hārā*” is not found in the commentaries as such but is usually linked with the verb root “*har*,” meaning “to carry or take away.”

see how they ultimately lead to the Buddha’s teachings as a coherent system.¹⁹⁸ It is the principles of this reverse engineering that the Peṭ and Nett seeks to offer the would-be-exegete. In the figurative words of Bond, “the purpose of the [16 *hārās*] is accurately described if we think of them as methods for understanding any authoritative passage as an *avatāra* of the *dhamma*” (Bond 1982, 46). The 16 *hārās* naturally lead one to the meaning of the words and phrases, which are covered by the five *nayas*, or “guidelines.” As Bond points out, “[t]he *nayā* or guidelines are the *Netti*’s most comprehensive categories of interpretation because they involve both the meaning (*attha*) and the phrasing (*byañjana*) of a passage” (Bond 1982, 44). The meaning itself is understood not in nakedly semantic terms, as we would expect to find in a lexicographical work, but in terms of moral factors, conceived as dyads, triads, or tetrads of unwholesome and wholesome states of mind, reflecting the influence of the Abhidhamma in the underlying system of the Peṭ and the Nett (Ñāṇamoli [1962b] 1977, viii). Acquiring and developing such wholesome states of mind are integral to any progress on the Buddhist path.

To appreciate how the methodology of the Peṭ and Nett is supposed to function, it is necessary to understand how otherwise generic Pali terms are redefined within a closed system of deep commentary, what we might call the underlying logic of the commentarial project. In a more conventional, or perhaps, explicit form of commentary, the word “*sutta*,” for example, refers simply to a discourse of the Buddha, whereas in these two texts, “*sutta*” is imbued with a highly technical sense, referring to the thread of the overall argument, or perhaps, the full vision of the Buddha when laying down a teaching and the soteriological potential he is supposed to

¹⁹⁸ According to Bond’s reading of the Nett, these core concepts, what he calls “the essence of the *dhamma*,” chiefly consist of the Four Noble Truths and the teaching of *paṭicca-samuppāda*, or “dependent origination” (Bond 1982, 80).

have planted in each and every word (Ñāṇamoli [1962b] 1977, xxxii). Taken for granted here is that the thread is always coherent and consistent, so it is the task of the commentator, according to the Peṭ and the Nett, to identify the inherent thread and recreate it without introducing any of their own contradictions. Most critically for the discussion at hand is the redefinition of the meaning of “meaning,” or “*attha*” in Pali. A notoriously polysemous word in Sanskrit and Pali, “*attha*” in more denotative commentaries meant for a general audience is usually taken merely as the meaning of a word, that is, its definition and object of reference. Hence there is a conceit held by many modern scholars that the act of composing commentary is simply to give the meaning of a word, or that at least this is the overarching function of any exegesis. The six commentarial strategies reviewed in the last chapter certainly give a prominent place to meaning (P. *pad’attha*), but the compilers of the Peṭ and the Nett are more concerned with commentary at a deeper level, furnishing exegetes with a principle to decide which meaning is most appropriate.

From the standpoint of a more superficial understanding of commentary, then, when a commentator like the Mingun Jetavana appears to stray from the basic task of supplying the meaning of a word or concept, or when they appear to assign a meaning that has no basis in the immediate context of the root text, then the commentary is considered a subpar work and the commentator is blamed for not understanding the “correct” meaning of the text (with the modern scholars being the arbiters of what is and is not “correct”). In the Peṭ and the Nett, however, the sense of “*attha*” as simply “meaning” is not invoked, or rather, is redeployed as the “meaning-in-aim,” a phrase I have borrowed from Ñāṇāmolī ([1962b] 1977). The idea of “meaning-in-aim” aligns itself more with other senses of “*attha*” as “welfare,” “aim,” or simply, “that which is good,” and in these two texts, the “meaning” of a word is more dynamic, since it refers to how the word in question points one towards the ultimate aim of Buddhism, namely, the path towards

nibbāna. Ñāṇamoli himself equates *attha* in the *Peṭakapadesa* and the *Nettipakaraṇā* as simply “liberation” (Ñāṇamoli [1962b] 1977, liv). In this context, the *attha* of a word stands in opposition to but works together with its specific phrasing, *byañjana* in Pali, since meaning-as-aim refers to that which the phrasing points to, what the words and their combination are meant to lead one towards. When taken in the sense of welfare, then, *attha* always stands in opposition to harm, which is anything that leads away from *nibbāna*, or at least obscures this final goal for the practitioner.

The methodology of the *Peṭ* and the *Nett* is germane to this chapter not only because the Mingun Jetavana published his own *Peṭ*-a more than 20 years before his commentary on the *Mil* (discussed in the next chapter), but because understanding how the Mingun Jetavana approaches the act of commentary allows us to see his digressions into meditation in a new light. For the Mingun Jetavana, the introduction to *vipassanā* meditation is through the *satipaṭṭhānas* (“foundations of mindfulness”¹⁹⁹) mentioned above and the set of *suttas* by that name.²⁰⁰ In the *Mil*-a, it seems the Mingun Jetavana uses every opportunity to invoke these *satipaṭṭhānas* in his explanation, starting with the answer of Nāgasena to the first question proper of Milinda: “How, O Venerable One, are you known, and what is your name?” (*Mil* trans. Pu [1983] 2006, 46). The answer to this question in the root text is a classic of Theravada doctrine, invoking the concept of non-self (P. *anatta*, S. *anatman*) underpinning the Buddhist system. Introducing the simile of the

¹⁹⁹ I recognize the attendant problems of translating the Pali word “*sati*” as ‘mindfulness’, and refer the reader to philosophical debates (Sharf 2015), scriptural arguments (B. Levman 2018), and anthropological perspectives (Cassaniti 2018) if they wish to delve deeper into this argument, which is pertinent to, but beyond the scope of this dissertation. That is not to say that the Mingun Jetavana’s work is not relevant in this debate.

²⁰⁰ Given his reliance on the set of *Satipaṭṭhāna* texts in the *Tipiṭaka*, the technique of the Mingun Jetavana is still known as ‘*sutta vipassanā*,’ or the method based on canonical material.

chariot to explain the conventional nature of human individuality, this episode is also probably the most well-known and cited from the Mil in contemporary scholarship. The Mingun Jetavana, in his explication of this classic inquiry, first discusses five types of queries the reader will find in the root text, laying out part of his own exegetical method in the process. In this excerpt below, we see the Mingun Jetavana offering the following example of two types of queries, invoking the four *satipaṭṭhāna* in the process:

“What do you think, O Monks, is the body permanent or impermanent?” “Impermanent, Venerable.” Having taken agreement with [a question] of this form, which is called at the time of the discourse a ‘question to discover the opinion,’ (*anumati*) [the Buddha says:] “There are to me, O Monks, four foundations of mindfulness.” What are the four?” [The Buddha] himself asked such a question to the assembly of monks, the question is itself called a question constructed for the desire of replying oneself [i.e. a rhetorical question].²⁰¹

Though the root text certainly lends itself to multiple trajectories of interpretation here, the Mingun Jetavana pivots on this seminal question to introduce the concept on which his meditation technique is based, the *satipaṭṭhānas*. Given that this point in the root text is where the dialogue between Nāgasena and Milinda begins in earnest, it is a critical juncture and anticipates the consistent turn towards topics of meditation throughout his commentary. My point here is that the intervention above is not a clumsy digression, but an example of the Mingun Jetavana invoking one of the *nayas* of the Peṭ and the Nett, namely, the *sīhavikkīṭita-naya*, or “guideline of the lion’s play.”

The third of the five *nayas*, the *sīhavikkīṭita-naya* is concerned not so much with the phrasing of a given passage, but its meaning-in-aim. Drawing from the *Nettipakaraṇa*-

²⁰¹ *taṃ kiṃ maññatha bhikkhave rūpaṃ niccaṃ vā aniccaṃ vā ti/ aniccaṃ bhante ti evarūpā anumatiṃ gahetvā desanākāle pucchā anumati-pucchā nāma/ cattārome bhikkhave satipaṭṭhānā/ katame cattāro ti evarūpā bhikkhusaṅghaṃ sayameva pucchitvā sayameva vissajjitukāmassa pucchā kattukamyatā pucchā nāma* (Mil-a 74,³³-75,⁵)

aṭṭhakathā, “the distinguishing characteristics of this Guide-Line are that it works with the Root-Tetrads and counters the 4 perversions by the four faculties of energy, mindfulness, concentration, and understanding, made the object of the faculty of faith” (Ñāṇamoli [1962b] 1977, xliii). The “root-tetrads” in this instance are further divided into unprofitable and profitable. The unprofitable root-tetrads for the *sīhavikkīṭita-naya* are the perception of beauty, of pleasure, of permanence, and of self; in contrast, the profitable root-tetrads are when one understands the purportedly beautiful object as ugly, the pleasurable and full of pain, the permanent as impermanent, and the self as not-self (Ñāṇamoli [1962b] 1977, xxxi). Hence looked at without recourse to the *sīhavikkīṭita-naya*, the Mingun Jetavana’s explanation of the question about Nāgasena’s personal identity comes off as a blunt and clumsy attempt to divert the root text to meditation; yet when we recognize that the principle of the *sīhavikkīṭita-naya* compels a commentator to counter unprofitable states of mind with those conducive to *nibbāna*, we understand that the Mingun Jetavana is proffering the four *satipaṭṭhānas* at this point in the root text as a sort of remedy to the self-view, at the heart of Milinda’s question to Nāgasena.

Recall that when using the *sīhavikkīṭita-naya*, a commentator is called to “analyze the unwholesome side in terms of the four inversions (*vipallāsa*): of conceiving beauty in the impure, pleasure in the unpleasurable, permanence in the impermanent, and selfhood in the non-self. It counters them with the four foundations of mindfulness, employing each foundation in a particular mode to rectify a specific inversion” (Bodhi [1978a] 2007, 40). According to the Pet and the Nett system, the four *satipaṭṭhānas* directly align with and invert the four unprofitable perversions of view, such that *sati* of the body helps the practitioner see the beautiful as impure, *sati* of feeling (P. *vedanā*) reveals what we thought to be pleasurable as painful, *sati* of the mind (P. *citta*) demonstrates the fleeting nature of thought, while *sati* of the *dharmas* shows that all

psychic and physical phenomena are substance-less, empty, and without a self (Bodhi [1978a] 2007, 40). Given that Milinda begins with one of the first questions about the personal identity of Nāgasena, it is natural that the Mingun Jetavana begins his explication here by “counteracting the unprofitable term with the appropriate profitable term following from the foundations of mindfulness,” thereby leading the reader straightaway “to the essence of the *dhamma* and the goal of the Buddha’s teaching” (Bond 1982, 66). In other words, the Mingun Jetavana is “break[ing] through the literalness of the text” (Vanhaelemeersch 2000, 321) and identifying for the reader the meaning-in-aim of Milinda’s question. This meaning-in-aim is, according to the *sīhavikkīṭita-naya*, the four *satipaṭṭhānas*, and given his affinity for the *satipaṭṭhāna* method of meditation, it is only natural that the Mingun Jetavana gravitates to this *naya* when commenting on the Mil.

There are numerous similar examples of the Mingun Jetavana turning to the *satipaṭṭhānas* as a means to explain, redirect, or “counter” Milinda’s questions in the root text. For instance, in his explanation of the simile of the lotus in the *Opammaapañhākaṇḍa* (Mil 374,²²-375,¹⁷), the Mingun Jetavana first outlines the 14 codes of conduct described in the *Vattakkhandhaka* of the Vinayaṭṭaka (Mil-a 315,¹⁴⁻¹⁹),²⁰² before launching into a discussion of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* over almost 17 pages (Mil-a 316,⁴-332,¹⁰) (Mizuno 2000, 21–22). During this extended aside—17 pages compared to a single page for the original question in the root text—the Mingun Jetavana pivots his description of meditation theory and practice around these 14 codes of conduct, while the style he deploys echoes much of the same language and pedagogy found in

²⁰² Margaret Cone lists these rules as relating to “*āgantuka*, *āvāsika*, *gamika*, *anumodana*, *bhattagga*, *piṇḍacārika*, *ārañṇika*, *senāsana*, *jantāghara*, *vaccakuṭi*, *upajjhāya*, *saddhivihārika*, *ācariya*, and *antevāsika*” (Cone, s.v. *khandhaka*), which the Mingun Jetavan also follows (Mil-a 315,¹⁴⁻¹⁹).

the *Nibbāna-kathā* and the *Nibbān lamḥ ññvan* referenced above. Indeed, this section strongly resembles these two vernacular meditation manuals and is unique as a Pali primer of the Mingun Jetavana’s teaching on meditation. Later on in the *Opammaṇhākaṇḍa*, the Mingun Jetavana uses the simile of the seven qualities of the lion (Mil 400,¹-401,¹⁵), which covers over two pages issues of begging for alms while practicing asceticism in the forest, to embark on a detailed discussion of meditation for 24 pages (Mil-a 382,²⁹-406,¹³), which Mizuno laments as “insufficiently organized” (Mizuno 2000, 26). In this extensive discussion, the Mingun Jetavana frames right *sammāsati* in terms of the *iriyāpathas* mentioned above, describing how one prepares for meditation in each of these four postures by finding the right environment and securing food and other necessities (Mizuno 2000, 26). As we saw above, the *iriyāpathas* represent the Mingun Jetavana’s basic, introductory teachings of *vipassanā*, meaning this episode in the Mil-a is a clear case of the commentator bringing in his own *vipassanā* training regime into the explication of the root text. Yet after this initial discussion, he progresses to explain the four *jhānas* of form and the four formless *jhānas*, the four *iddhipādas* (“the bases of supernatural powers”), and the *abhiññās* in general (Mizuno 2000, 26), which exemplify the Mingun Jetavana’s willingness to blend the goals of *vipassanā* and *samatha* techniques into an overall presentation of his meditation theory.

Conclusion

Again, the point of the Mingun Jetavana in making these extended “digressions” is not, I argue, to overtly introduce his meditation theory into a root text where it does not ostensibly belong, but rather, to guide the reader to the “meaning-in-aim” latent in the root text as he understands it. Indeed, according to some anecdotes in his biography, the Mingun Jetavana even makes use of

the Nett when teaching meditation. Tikkhacara writes that when the Mahasi first came to receive instruction on meditation from the Mingun Jetavana in March of 1932, the teacher provided him instructions combining his own experience with reference to the Nett, citing the following passage from this text and explaining it in detail (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 61):

‘*A bhikkhu is mindful in his wanderings,*’ [means] he should, for the purpose of a pleasant abiding here and now, abide mindful and aware in advancing and retreating, in looking and looking away, in flexing and extending, in wearing the patched-cloak, bowl and [other] robes, in eating, drinking, chewing and tasting, in evacuating and making water, in walking, standing, sitting, going to sleep, waking, talking and keeping silent.²⁰³ (Nett trans. Ñāṇamoli [1962a] 1977, 34)

By citing this text when teaching the Mahasi his *vipassanā* technique, the Mingun Jetavana was applying the methodology of the Peṭ and the Nett to the Nett itself, construing its meaning-in-aim as directed towards *nibbāna* via the practice of meditation. One could argue whether he is correct in this assessment, but as this chapter has shown, the meaning-in-aim, “the essence of the *dhamma*,” as Bond puts it, is overwhelmingly connected to *vipassanā* for the Mingun Jetavana. As his life and career have shown, he was an innovator in terms of the technique, institutional setting, and target audience of meditation practice in the first half of the twentieth century in Burma. It is no surprise, then, that he is also weaving *vipassanā* into his Pali commentaries, using the six commentarial strategies outlined in the last chapter together with the “deep commentarial logic” of the Peṭ and the Nett. This deep logic is animated for the Mingun Jetavana by the mass lay meditation movement in which he was such a central founding figure in the first half of the twentieth century.

²⁰³ *Sato bhikkhu parabbaje ti. Tena diṭṭhadhammasukhavihāratthaṃ abhikkante paṭikkante ālokite vilokite sammiñjite pasārite saṃghāṭipattacīvaradhāraṇe asite pite khāyite sāyite uccārapassāvakamme gate ṭhite nisinne suttee jāgarite bhāsīte tuṅhībhāve satena sampajānena vihātabbaṃ* (Nett 20,²²⁻²⁷)

Whether one agrees with his interpretation of the Mil or not, it is clear that the Mingun Jetavana is working with a larger project in mind, and though his interpretations appear to be incongruent with the root text on many occasions, he would have dismissed our confusion as the cries of foolish persons (P. *andhabāla*), akin to foxes or dogs who fail to grasp “the essence of the *dhamma*” at play in the root text. For as we will explore in the next chapter, the Mingun Jetavana understood himself as no ordinary exegete, but one who was informed by his own experience reaching the highest stages of *vipassanā* practice. Part of the authority of a text like the Mil-a thus stems from the alternative base of religious authority that the Mingun Jetavana built through his status as a meditation teacher. But more than his credibility as a *vipassanā* adept, he enjoyed immense social currency from the narratives of enlightenment that surrounded his life and death. To his followers and many in the public sphere, the Mingun Jetavana was considered a living *arahant*, one example of a broader shift in how people in Burma understood what was and was not possible in their own age of *sāsana* decline, 2500 years removed from the time of the Buddha. The phenomenon of the living *arahant* in Burma is thus an essential part of the ethos surrounding not just the Mingun Jetavana as author, but the force and reception of his Mil-a. The status of monks like the Mingun Jetavana was a delicate question, however, for as Pranke cautions, “while there is no recorded instance where any [Burmese monks] declared themselves to be enlightened—this being prohibited by the monastic code—many were deemed by their disciples, and by the public at large, as having attained *arahantship*, or if not that, then nearly so” (Pranke 2010, 463). Yet given the evidence I will present in the following chapter, it is not entirely clear that the prohibition in the monastic code was enough to prevent these purportedly enlightened beings from openly but indirectly declaring their status, or at least, of their disciples and themselves acting it out obliquely. It is these narratives of enlightenment

surrounding the Mingun Jetavana that we now take up, examining how the reception of his commentary revolved around his status as a living *arahant*, and how the act of writing commentary became for him a form of practice itself.

5 Twentieth-century Narratives of Enlightenment and the Practice of Writing Commentary

Introduction

In Theravada Buddhist countries, the vitality of the Buddha's institutionalized teachings (P. *sāsana*) and the nature of the soteriological path (P. *magga*) have been the subjects of intense scholarly and public debate for centuries. According to Pali canonical and commentarial accounts, the teachings of the historical Buddha are said to last only 5000 years, with the highest goal of the spiritual path, that of *arahant*, increasingly difficult to attain. An *arahant*, literally, one who has "killed [their] enemies," is said to have eradicated all active and latent traces of greed, hatred, and ignorance, thereby removing any karmic residue from their actions and escaping from the existential-angst-ridden cycle of rebirth and re-death (P. *samsāra*). To reach this point, one passes through three lower stages, first entering the religious path as a stream-entrant (P. *sotāpanna*), then becoming a once-returner (P. *sakadāgāmin*) who will be reborn only once more in human form, escaping human birth altogether and incarnating in a heavenly realm as a non-returner (P. *anāgāmin*), then facing no more rebirth and thus an end to all suffering as an *arahant*. Upon entering the path, it is said that it takes at most seven more lifetimes to reach the stage of an *arahant* (Bond 1984, 231), while according to the *Satipaṭṭhāna suttas* at the centre of the Mingun Jetavana's meditation method, this goal can be accomplished in as little as a week. Aside from becoming a buddha, an *arahant* is the highest possible stage according to Theravada soteriology.

If someone were to have publicly claimed the status of an *arahant* or even the lower stages in what we now call Burma before 1800, that person would risk being forced to disrobe

and doomed to shovel manure in the royal stables (Pranke 2010, 456). According to Richard Gombrich, some of his monastic informants in 1960s-Sri Lanka believed it was not even possible to become a stream-entrant at that time (Gombrich 1995, 333), the first stage of the path. Yet starting around the end of the nineteenth century there was a rise in the belief that so-called living *arahants* existed in Burma, transforming both the soteriological and political landscape of the country. About a dozen or so individuals were thought to have achieved this status, including the Mingun Jetavana.²⁰⁴ Most of these individuals were associated with the practice of *vipassanā* meditation, hence his identity as a meditation practitioner and teacher was a critical part of the Mingun Jetavana’s public persona as an *arahant*. In this chapter, I shall argue that the Mil-a was also an integral element in what I am calling “the narratives of enlightenment” that built up around the Mingun Jetavana in his inner circles and the public sphere. I aim to demonstrate that the act of writing an *aṭṭhakathā*, when approached as a form of practice, is an integral component of demonstrating one’s attainment along the stages of the Theravada path, especially since the last set of *aṭṭhakathās* were composed up to a millennium ago. In other words, his ability to write

²⁰⁴ Other purported “living *arahants*” of the twentieth century include the Nyaunglun Sayadaw (ညောင်လွန်ဆရာတော် Ṇñoṇ Ivan. Cha rā tau, a.k.a., ဦးမေအဝီ ။ Medāvī 1867-1933) (Houtman 1990b, 291), the Sunlun Sayadaw (စွန်းလွန်းဆရာတော် Cvanḥ Ivanḥ Cha rā tau, a.k.a., ဦးကဝိ ။ Kavi 1878-1952) (Pyi Phyo Kyaw 2019, 247), the Webu Sayadaw (ဝေဘူဆရာတော် Ve bhū Cha rā tau, a.k.a., ဦးကုမာရ ။ Kumāra, 1898-1977) (Tin Than Myint 2008, ix), the Mogoke Sayadaw (မိုးကုတ်ဆရာတော် Muiḥ kut Cha rā tau, a.k.a., ဦးဝိမလ ။ Vimala, 1899-1962) (Tin Than Myint 2008, ix), the Theinngu Sayadaw (သဲအင်းဂူဆရာတော် Sai aṅḥ gū Cha rā tau, a.k.a., ဦးဥက္ကဋ္ဌ ။ Ukkatṭha 1913-1973) (Pyi Phyo Kyaw 2019, 247), the Taungpulu Sayadaw (တောင်ပုလုဆရာတော် toṅ pu lu Cha rā tau, a.k.a., ဦးနန္ဒိယ ။ nandiya, 1897-1986), and the Thamanya Sayadaw (သာမညဆရာတော် Sāmañña cha rā tau, a.k.a., ဦးဝိနယ ။ vinaya, 1912-2003) (Tosa 2009, 240). This list is neither exhaustive nor universally accepted, as the designation of who is and who is not enlightened is always a contested category and likely regional in nature.

the first *aṭṭhakathā* in more ten centuries—combined with his meditation prowess—is an integral part of the enlightenment discourses that circulated in public about the Mingun Jetavana during his life and after his death.

To reconceptualise commentary as a form of practice, the discussion begins with an example of the Jain exegetes in the section titled “Commentary as a Form of Practice,” in which I offer comparative instances where composing commentary on scriptural texts can be reframed as a form of practice for the exegete and as contemplative exercises for the reader. Next, I turn to the “lion’s roar” of the Peṭ-a, a text introduced in the last chapter as the first commentary published by the Mingun Jetavana two decades prior to the Mil-a. The description of the Mingun Jetavana’s ascetic-like approach to composing his first *aṭṭhakathā* suggests, at least figuratively, that the Mingun Jetavana took the root text as an object of meditation, embodying the text and mentally composing his commentary before setting pen to paper. Proceeding to the section “Making the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*,” I continue my argument from last chapter that based on his approach to this commentary and some of the motivations for its composition offered in the text itself, the Mingun Jetavana can be said to have relied on his special insight as an advanced practitioner of meditation to explicate such an enigmatic root text as the Mil. The consequence of this approach is that in order to assess the validity of the Mil-a, the reading audience of the mid-twentieth century sought recourse to the spiritual status of the commentator himself, at least this is what I argue in my section on a special edition from the *Ba mā. khet* (ဗမာ့ခေတ် *Burma Times*; hereafter the *Burma Times*) from 1955,²⁰⁵ wherein the reader is provided an opportunity to

²⁰⁵ In using the English title of this Burmese newspaper, I am taking the lead of the newspaper itself, which provides the title “Burma Times” on its front pages.

affirmatively speculate about the Mingun Jetavana’s enlightenment and his ascendancy over the critics to his commentary. In this way, the identity and legacy of the “Mingun Jetavana” is a contested site where different rhetorical strategies are deployed to assess or reject the validity of his controversial commentary. The Mil-a should thus be seen as an integral part of the public and political discourse about the Mingun Jetavana’s spiritual status in twentieth-century Burma, but also as one part of a larger discussion on the possibility of the *abhiññās* in the age of *sāsana* decline, the topic of the next chapter to follow.

5.1 Commentary as a Form of Practice

The English word “practice” can mean many things, such as practicing meditation, training to master a sport, or learning a new language. While I am using “practice” as a loose equivalent to “meditation,” there are in Pali different signifiers that can be rendered into the latter term. Perhaps the Pali word that best captures what I am trying to reference when I use “meditation” is “*bhāvanā*,” which can be translated as “cultivation” or even better, “development.” A subtle but crucial etymological point is that “*bhāvanā*” is derived from the causative form of the dynamic verb root “*bhū*,” kinetic in the sense that can mean “to become” rather than the more static verb root “*as*,” meaning “is,” which connotes the sense of a stable snapshot of an individual, phenomenon, or state of being in a stationary, self-contained moment. The distinction between these verbal roots is not insignificant, since “*bhū*” implies the sense of moving from one state to another not yet realised, which is essentially the goal of mental cultivation or mental development through repeated practice of meditation. Invoking this sense of the term “*bhāvanā*,” Cousins claims that “this term refers very precisely to the bringing into being of the *bodhipakkhiyadhammas* [(the factors of enlightenment)] in general or the eightfold path in

particular. In other words, such activities as studying or teaching the *dhamma* as well as chanting *suttas* or repetition of *gāthās* [(verses)] may equally be forms of *bhāvanā*” alongside meditation (Cousins 1994, 41). A key word in the quote from Cousins here is “repetition,” as Christoph Emmrich has explored both the formal and doctrinal aspects of repetition found in the Tipiṭaka and *aṭṭhakathās* (Emmrich 2022). Crucially for our discussion, Emmrich not only traces the penchant for commentaries to use repetition to further adorn and fortify (*P. alankāra*) the root texts on which they comment, but “[t]he commentarial analysis of verbal forms denoting key mental practices reveals that their very functioning is premised on repetition, that one cannot perceive or remember properly without doing it again and again at different times and with different mental objects” (Emmrich 2022, 150). In a discussion of the Pali word “*āsevana*” in the *Vism*, Emmrich elaborates on the role of repetition in the commentaries as a form of “assiduous practice” in textual recitation, memorization, and meditation, pointing out the links between this term and “*bhāvanā*” as “development” and “*bahulīkamma*” as “cultivation” (Emmrich 2022, 151). Thus, by examining the various Pali terms and their connotations used to describe mental development and cultivation in the Tipiṭaka and *aṭṭhakathās*, it becomes possible to expand how we understand the act of writing a commentary, which requires a great deal of reading, memorization, and repetition, as a type of meditative practice. Further opening up this possible reading, Cousins notes that this wider definition of “*bhāvanā*” as including study and composition “is certainly the position of the *aṭṭhakathā* and was probably that of traditional Theravāda Buddhism” (Cousins 1994, 41). How, then, did commentators of the past understand their work? Or in the words of Laurie Patton, how does one approach commentary “with a view to the investments of the commentators themselves—what they stand to gain from framing and placing the canon in the ways that they do” (Patton 1977, 13)?

Paul Dundas offers a helpful entry point into these question from the perspective of the Jain exegetical tradition, stressing that commentary is an essential component for the soteriological path of Jainism (Dundas 1996, 87). Echoing our discussion on the *Milinda-ñkā* in Chapter Two, Dundas states that modern philologists have often “castigated [Jain commentary] as misguided, unreliable and pedantic, obfuscating the unmediated understanding of the root text” (Dundas 1996, 75). Yet for the exegetes and their contemporaneous religious audience, the commentaries were essential to understanding the Jain canonical texts themselves. The necessity of the commentary vis-à-vis the canon in Jain histories can be explained by “evidence that the Jain scriptures had become increasingly inaccessible from the early medieval period” (Dundas 1996, 83). Writing in 1277 C.E., the commentator Prabhācandra explains the challenges faced by an earlier exegete, Abhayadeva, as follows:

At that time, because of the difficult situation of the region due to the depredations caused by famine, the doctrine was disrupted (*siddhāntas truṭim ayāsīt*) and the commentaries (*vṛttayah*) disappeared. What scriptural texts (*sūtram*) survived (*īsat sthitam*) then became uncultivated ground (*khilam*) in which the meaning of the regional (*deśya*) words they contained was difficult to understand even for the wise. (Dundas 1996, 80)

Even though modern philologists sometimes view the Jain commentaries as distractions or impediments to the “true” meaning of the *sūtras*, the above quotes demonstrates that the situation was different for someone like Abhayadeva. The later exegete, Prabhācandra, goes on to explain the toll trying to rectify this situation had on Abhayadeva: “through fasting, lack of sleep and intense exertion while working on his commentaries, [Abhayadeva] was afflicted with a skin disease which was popularly ascribed to punishment for his incorrect interpretation of the scriptures” (Dundas 1996, 82). In this rendering, the act of writing commentary on the Jain *sūtras* was akin to an ascetic exercise that required extreme sacrifice on the part of the exegete. Indeed, for someone like Dharmasāgara, a Jain exegete active in the 16th century, the ability of a

teacher to accurately explicate a canonical text was precisely because of their “ascetic restraint” (Dundas 1996, 86).²⁰⁶ As such, Dundas points out that the Jaina commentators “do not appear to have regarded themselves as merely engaging in acts of textual explication, a[s] for them scriptural exegesis seems to have been a means of conferring merit upon those who heard or read it” (Dundas 1996, 78). Hence the composition of “commentary could be linked by its practitioners with that compassion which informs the Jain conception of true religiosity” (Dundas 1996, 78), the compassion supposedly exemplified by someone like Abhayadeva who was said to have suffered so much in pursuit of his religious vocation.²⁰⁷

While the Pali Tipiṭaka is more intact and accessible than the Jain scriptures, of which there is no complete recension, much of what Dundas claims about Jain commentarial composition is instructive in thinking about the Theravada commentarial project as well. Like the Jain commentaries, for instance, some modern philologists have also viewed the *aṭṭhakathās* and their subcommentaries as obstructions to accessing the “original words of the Buddha,” explaining the *de facto* limited role of such exegeses in the field of Buddhist Studies over the last

²⁰⁶ Gornall and Ruiz-Falqués signal a similar concern with ascetic ability in pre-modern scholarship (Gornall and Ruiz-Falqués 2019). They remark that “[n]ot unlike the postscripts attached to Buddhaghosa’s works, the scholarly and spiritual achievements [of Pali scholars working in Sri Lanka after the 10th century] are often eulogized in elaborate and lengthy colophons,” many of which emphasize their “ascetic power” (Gornall and Ruiz-Falqués 2019, 424). “The 12th century scholar Sāriputta, for instance, a leading intellectual in the aftermath of Parākramabāhu I’s saṅgha reforms (c. 1165),” was said to be the “lord of the ascetics (*yatissara*)” in the colophon of his commentary on the *Abhidhammasatthasaṅgha* (Gornall and Ruiz-Falqués 2019, 424).

²⁰⁷ Writing in the field of philosophy, Preisendanz argues that the “[s]weeping statements of scholars like Radhakrishnan and Heinrich Zimmer who declare that without the commentaries the philosophical texts are unintelligible should be situated in the context of their outlook on Indian philosophy as fundamentally spiritual and visionary, and thus be understood as an outflow of their unstated presupposition that the ancient philosophers, writers of basic works and commentaries alike, were not mere academic scholars, but well-grounded in their faithfully transmitted spiritual traditions and therefore blessed with a profound insight which cannot be achieved by us moderns” (Preisendanz 2008, 604). I think Preisendanz is right, and that is exactly my point, since I am not so much interested in the validity of the root texts in question here, but in how authors like the Mingun Jetavana understood their own role and task as commentators explicating such root texts.

century. While this situation has improved dramatically in the last few decades,²⁰⁸ the deconstruction of authors like Buddhaghosa can at times be overly Foucauldian and reductive, since it does not provide space for the religious and ultimately soteriological motivations of this classic commentator or his school, which we saw were an integral part of the deep logic of writing commentary according to the Peṭ and the Nett. Like the Jain exegetes after him, Buddhaghosa and his “school”²⁰⁹ probably did not see their role as *just* editors, redactors, or translators, though such tasks were no doubt essential aspect of their work; rather, they also understood themselves as engaging in the religious work of beautifying and fortifying (*sensu* Emmrich 2022, 147) the essence of the Tipiṭaka, albeit according to the specific tenets of the Mahāvihāra school. Similar to the Jain exegetes described by Dundas, Buddhaghosa and his school must also have recognized the act of composing commentary as a means to generate merit, both for themselves but for future generations of readers. In the words of Paul Griffiths, they were thus aiming their commentaries at the “ruminatory religious reader” (Griffiths 1999, 132), which partly explains why the Pali commentaries were overlooked by generations of academics “except for the philological and historical information that may be gleaned from them” (Griffiths 1999, 132). In other words, the goals of the academic and the goals of the “ruminatory religious reader” are not always in alignment, or better, these two roles often meld

²⁰⁸ See, for instance, Sōdo Mori (1991; 2007), Toshiichi Endo (2013), L.S. Cousins (2013), Oskar von Hinüber (2013), Petra Kieffer-Pülz (2016), and Maria Heim (2014; 2018b) for a few examples of recent scholars who foreground the Pali commentaries in their work or take them as the principle site of their analyses.

²⁰⁹ This reference to “school” is a nod to the deconstruction of the authoritative, authorial identity of “Buddhaghosa,” with the commentaries ascribed to this name now treated as the products of a committee of translators, scribes, researchers, and protégés, or rather, the “School of Buddhaghosa,” as Cousins has phrased it (Cousins 2013, 390). This act of deconstruction is more historically accurate given the complexity of writing commentary and the substantial economic and even political infrastructure required for such a long-term endeavor, especially as represented by the *aṭṭhakathās*, which would have required many scholars and assistants working over a long period of time, but the individuality of the nominal author has been neglected or diffused.

together in a larger initiative and cannot be neatly separated from each other in someone like Buddhaghosa. Recognizing this synthesis allows us to position Pali commentaries in a new light.

Taking seriously these soteriological concerns for Buddhaghosa as an exegete aiming his work at “the ruminatory religious reader,” Maria Heim conducts a sort of literary anthropology of this classical commentator. While she acknowledges the deconstruction of Buddhaghosa by Cousins and others, Heim claims that as an individual author or the head of a team of translators, compilers, and editors, “Buddhaghosa's interpretative assumptions often treat the Buddha's teachings not as declarative or discursive utterances so much as *practices*” (Heim 2018b, 3) (italics in original). In this sense, it is not just the content of such teachings the reader is supposed to engage with, but also the form in which they are presented, a form conducive to training the mind similar to the “assiduous practice” Emmrich mentions above. Yet Heim takes her argument even further, pointing out many passages of Buddhaghosa’s commentaries that do not only interpret every word of the Buddha as an opportunity for practice, but instances where the commentary itself presents such an opportunity. This transformation of commentary as an opportunity for meditative practice for the reader is most apparent in cases where Buddhaghosa describes the diverse names and qualities of the Buddha. In such instances, “the passage doing exegetical work explaining the Buddha's words is at one and the same time used as a contemplative exercise in a training in meditation, suggesting a conflation or a dual purpose of textual analysis and contemplative analysis” (Heim 2018b, 20). That is to say, “the textual exposition *itself* constitutes the contemplative practices” (Heim 2018b, 69). When taken in this way, the explications found in the classical *aṭṭhakathās* become a sort of “phenomenological analysis,” in addition to a literary analysis and textual exegesis, which in turn “prompt[s] therapeutic and soteriological transformation” in the reader (Heim 2018b, 23). Saying something

in the context of early twentieth-century Burma, Braun claims the Ledi's major innovation was the “transform[ation]” of the study of *abhidhamma* philosophy “from an elite monastic practice of commentarial exegesis in precolonial times to one of lay study for self-cultivation in the colonial period” (Braun 2013, 121). Indeed, according to Braun, this transformation is one of the factors of the revival of *vipassanā* meditation in the twentieth century, where exegesis and mental development are synthesized together (Braun 2013, 121). The insights of Heim and Braun here provide an opening to explore the same kind of phenomenon in the composition of the Mingun Jetavana's commentaries, beginning with the Peṭ-a.

5.2 Lion's Roar of the *Petaḥkopadesa-aṭṭhakathā*

No one in Southeast Asia, let alone Burma, seems to have composed an *aṭṭhakathā* before the Mingun Jetavana,²¹⁰ at least according to his devotees. In fact, there is no record known to me of any *aṭṭhakathā* having been composed at least since the 16th century and perhaps as far back as the 11th century, leaving possibly a millennium from that time until the Mingun Jetavana began his Peṭ-a in 1926.²¹¹ The inspiration for this endeavour began around the same time that the Mingun Jetavana started practicing *vipassanā* based on the *Satipaṭṭhāna suttas* after scouring the Pali texts looking for a way to *nibbāna*, as he told the Aletawya Sayadaw (Bio trsl Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 21). According to Yee Yee Win, “[w]hile in [the] young age of his monkhood, the

²¹⁰ Some Burmese scholars, however, take Buddhaghosa as a native of Lower Burma (Nyein Chan Maung 2006, 11). It is also possible, as von Hinüber suggests (following Bechert 1958, 20), that the *Visuddhajanavilāsinī*, the *aṭṭhakathā* on the on the *Apadāna*, “was composed in Southeast Asia,” but this fact is far from established (von Hinüber 2000, 147).

²¹¹ The dates given for the *Visuddhajanavilāsinī*, considered the last *aṭṭhakathā* to be composed, range from 1000 to 1500 C.E. (von Hinüber 2000, 149),

future [Mingun Jetavana] thought, after reading the *Paramatthadīpanī Tīkā* (*Subcommentary on the Manual of Ultimate Truth*),²¹² compiled by the Ledi Sayadaw in [the] *Pāli* language, ‘I will compile *Aṭṭhakathās* in *Pāli* when I [am] old enough’” (Yee Yee Win 2011, 174). This statement is quite remarkable, since it shows the high aspirations of the Mingun Jetavana, for even the Ledi did not compose in the *aṭṭhakathā* genre. Yet soon the Mingun Jetavana would have his chance. He told his close disciple, Tikkhacara, that during his search through the Tipitaka and its commentaries, “he found that there was no commentary on the Pāli *Peṭakopadesa*, although there have been commentaries on all the remaining Pāli texts” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 23) (except, of course, for the Mil). It was strange to the Mingun Jetavana that Buddhaghosa had left the Peṭ without an *aṭṭhakathā*, given the status of its supposed author, Mahā Kaccāyana, who had “attained four kinds of analytical knowledge (*paṭisambhidā*), six kinds of supernatural powers (*abhiññā*), and eight kinds of meditative absorptions (*samāpatti*), and [who had] been honored by the Buddha as the foremost among monks who could elaborate what the Buddha taught in brief” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 76). In a move that anticipates the “methods handed down to future monks” (*P. anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ nayo dinno*) that will become a major feature of proceeding chapters, “it seem[ed] to the [Mingun Jetavana] that this text was left for the new generation to write a commentary on” (Bio. trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 15). In other words, Buddhaghosa purposely left the Peṭ without an *aṭṭhakathā* so that a future monk worthy of the task could undertake this endeavor and compose an *aṭṭhakathā*,

²¹² This text is known by two names: the *Paramatthadīpanī* and the *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha Mahāṭīkā* (Shwe Wah Soe 2004, 711), hence the reference here to the “*Paramatthadīpanī Tīkā*” seems to be a combination of these two names. It was published in 1901 (Braun 2013, 45), when the Mingun Jetavana was about 33 years old. There is some inconsistency in the numbers, however, since the Mingun Jetavana’s biography states that he held the dream of writing the Peṭ-a since “he was a young monk of eight vassas (28 years of age)” (Tikkhācāra [1957] 2014, 66), so perhaps the inspiration of the *Paramatthadīpanī* was an interpolation of sorts, more of a justification than catalyst.

at least as far as the Mingun Jetavana was concerned. He said as much according to Tikkhacara’s biography, for “it occurred to [the Mingun Jetavana] that it must be a mission left for him to accomplish” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 23). In other words, the Mingun Jetavana believe that he personally was the future monk Buddhaghosa had in mind. Depicting this event in figurative terms, the biography asserts that even though the Mingun Jetavana was still “a young monk who had just got six years of monkhood (*vassa*), [he] boldly thought about writing [a] Pāli commentary; he was as brave as a lion that holds absolute power over the wildlife in the entire three mountain ranges!” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 16). In this way, by representing the audacious act of writing a commentary as a “lion’s roar,” his close disciple Tikkhacara signals the Peṭ-a as a formative point in the Mingun Jetavana’s spiritual path, an undertaking connected to his search for a meditation method in the Tipiṭaka. Yet why did the Mingun Jetavana feel qualified to undertake such a difficult task, and how did his community of devotees justify his unprecedented undertaking?

Part of the answer to these questions is found in the Mingun Jetavana’s ascetic-like approach to composing the Peṭ-a, which mirrors the experiences of the Jain exegetes mentioned in the first section. Like the Jain canonical texts in the medieval period, the Peṭ presents a formidable challenge to any would-be-commentator, not least because the manuscripts available in the early twentieth century consisted “not only of words wrong in their context but often of meaningless jumbles of syllables” (Ñāṇamoli 1964, xiii). With these strings of errors and “meaningless jumbles of syllables,” the task of any potential commentator was fraught, since the risk of improperly correcting and misinterpreting the root text becomes much more likely. One particularly bad passage is lamented by Ñāṇamoli, who describes a “muddle” at the end of the last chapter, *Nayasamuṭṭhāna* (*The Moulding of the Guide-lines*), where “many words are mixed

up, there are egregious insertions of other texts, and some of the words are really just incomprehensible strings of syllables” (Ñāṇamoli 1964, xx). In rectifying this passage, the Mingun Jetavana boldly declares in his commentary that he will use the methodology of the Peṭ and the Nett introduced in the last chapter, namely, the *nayas* and the *hārās*, to “establish [the muddled text] as disentangled [and] unmixed after laying [it] out in the proper order, prepared in a completely pure state”²¹³ (Peṭ-a 353,⁸⁻⁹). Following this declaration, the Mingun Jetavana then distills for his reader what exactly is at stake in the perilous task he is about to perform as commentator:

Keeping in mind [the following] is to respect (*garuṃ katvā*) the *dhamma*: “a wrong course (*agatigamaṇaṃ*) should not be conceived (*gandhabbaṃ*) by noble ones by explaining the *dhamma* or cultivating it like this (*īdisena*).” Why? Because even with one letter and also with one word [mixed up and off course], whereby the meaning is wrongly arranged (*dunnikkhito*), is also wrong or is wrongly grasped (*duggahito*), because of that [mistake], the teaching (*sāsana*) leads to the disappearance of the [dhamma]²¹⁴. Yet even with one letter and one word [unmixed and on the right course], the meaning is properly arranged (*sunikkhito*), is also well grasped and the sense is proper (*sunayo*), because of that the *sāsana* leads to the non-disappearance [i.e., the revealing] of the [dhamma].²¹⁵ (Peṭ-a 353,¹¹⁻¹⁶)

Like the Jain exegetes above, the task of commenting on the Peṭ is no light undertaking for the Mingun Jetavana. In the above passage, he stresses that nothing less than the disappearance of the *dhamma*—of the Buddha’s teachings from the present age—is at stake in his proper handling

²¹³ *asaṅkaraṃ nijaṭaṃ suparisuddhaṭṭhāne yutte yeva hi sati yuttaṭṭhāne nikkhepiya ṭhapyessāma* (Peṭ-a 353,⁸⁻⁹)

²¹⁴ Though it is not entirely clear what “*assa*” is referring to in this passage, note a passage in the *Anguttaranikāya* about the disappearance of the “true *dhamma*” to which Ñāṇamoli refers when citing this excerpt from the Peṭ-a (1964, xx): *cattārome, bhikkhave, dhammā saddhammassa sammōsāya antaradhānāya saṃvattanti. katame cattāro? idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhū duggahitaṃ suttantaṃ pariyāpuṇanti dunnikkhittehi padabyañjanehi. dunnikkhittassa, bhikkhave, padabyañjanaṃ atthopi dunnayo hoti. ayaṃ, bhikkhave, paṭhamo dhammo saddhammassa sammōsāya antaradhānāya saṃvattati* (A II 147,¹⁷⁻²³)

²¹⁵ *na hi agatigamaṇaṃ ariyehi gandhabbaṃ dhammaṃ saṃvaṇṇantena nāma īdisena bhavitabbaṃ ti manasikatvā dhammaṃ yeva garuṃ katvā / kena kāraṇena? / Yena hi ekena pi akkharena padena pi dunnikkhitto attho pi dunnayo hoti duggahito / ten’ assa sāsanaṃ antaradhānāya saṃvattati / yenāpi ekenakkharena padenāpi sunikkhitto attho pi sunayo hoti sugahito ten’ assa sāsanaṃ anantaradhānāya saṃvattati* (Peṭ-a 353,¹¹⁻¹⁶)

of the root text. In this way, the act of writing a commentary portends not only soteriological, but eschatological consequences, which burdens the task of exegesis cosmological consequences, as an act beyond mere mundane textual criticism and semantic explication.

A second difficulty in writing a commentary on this text is the fact that the Peṭ already assumes an advanced knowledge of Theravada doctrine not merely of the commentator, which is a given, but of its audience. Ñāṇamoli explains this fact by clarifying that the Peṭ “is addressed not to those who do not yet know but wish to learn the Buddha’s Teaching but, on the contrary, to those who wish to explain and expand the Teaching they have already intellectually learnt to those who do not know and wish to learn” (Ñāṇamoli 1964, xxiv). In other words, the Peṭ is aimed at potential exegetes, and its own commentary should therefore be reserved for a the most accomplished expert and adept in the field. Considering the fact that the Mingun Jetavana had not even composed a *ṭīkā* (subcommentary) or *dīpanī* (manual) beforehand, his attempt to compose an *aṭṭhakathā* on a text explicitly intended for commentators was an especially challenging and brazen task. Finally, the language of the Peṭ itself is already highly technical and represents a sort of closed system of exegesis, and along with the frequent copyist errors mentioned above, it would have required someone extremely well versed in Pali and the Tipiṭaka to interpret, let alone compose its *aṭṭhakathā*. Indeed, Ñāṇamoli states that the only way to approach such a text is to have the ability to recognize “quotations or allusions” and locate them in other parts of the Tipiṭaka, or to judge the context “according to the general trends of the [Peṭ] itself and of the Suttas as a whole” (Ñāṇamoli 1964, xviii). To thus meet these many challenges head on, it is claimed in his biography that the Mingun Jetavana “went through the whole three Baskets or five collections of Buddha’s teachings and their commentaries, sub-commentaries, sub-subcommentaries, translations, and glossaries and explanations of difficult words and

phrases” before he wrote the Peṭ-a (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 75). All these considerations partly explain why there existed no *aṭṭhakathā* on this text beforehand, not even a *īṭkā* that I am aware of,²¹⁶ thereby demonstrating the self-confidence and perhaps even audacity that the young Mingun Jetavana had in his own abilities.

With the difficulties outlined above in mind, the Mingun Jetavana approached the Peṭ like an object of *āsevana* to be memorised and assiduously practiced. In an extensive footnote, Tikkhacara claims that the Mingun Jetavana “once told me that he first memorized the entire Pāli canon of [the] *Peṭakopadesa*, and then mentally wrote the commentary on it by making definitions of difficult words and clarification of unclear points. Only when all these definitions and clarifications were satisfying to him, did he write them down on the paper” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 77). Framed in the words of Griffiths, this approach demonstrates that Mingun Jetavana was clearly not a “consumerist reader” of the Peṭ (Griffiths 1999, 32). Skilton, Crosby, and Pyi Phyo Kyaw explain that from the “perspective” of such a reader, a “text is [...] an intellectual property to be interrogated by the scholar, who might even presume to opine on its orthodoxy and validity” (Skilton, Crosby, and Pyi Phyo Kyaw 2019, 11). Indeed, in light of the unrefined state of the manuscript witnesses and the corrupted recensions of the text mentioned above, it would be understandable to form such skeptical opinions about the Peṭ and its legitimacy. In contrast, the Mingun Jetavana did not “opine on its orthodoxy and validity,” but rather, “read (heard), reread, memorized, pondered upon, excerpted, commented upon, [...] and

²¹⁶ There is, however, an *aṭṭhakathā* on the sister text of the *Peṭakopadesa*, the Nett, traditionally ascribed to Dhammapāla. Since the Nett is generally thought to supersede the earlier *Peṭakopadesa* in both quality and structure, perhaps it was thought to be redundant to compose an *aṭṭhakathā* on both texts. In fact, the *Nettipakarāṇa-aṭṭhakathā* does cite seven paragraphs from the *Peṭakopadesa* in its explication (Ñāṇamoli 1964, xxx).

incorporated” the Peṭ into his daily life and routine (Griffiths 1999, 147). In a metaphorical sense, the Mingun Jetavana not only composed the commentary, but internalized it, transforming himself into a living, breathing, walking (standing, sitting, and lying down) Peṭ-a. He thus approached his task not just as a religious reader, but as the quintessential religious commentator.

Understanding the Mingun Jetavana in this way helps explain the oral quality (and dictation errors) of his Pali style, but also testifies to the extraordinary faculty of memory he is said to have possessed. While it is true that elementary and primary education in Burma when the Mingun Jetavana was young, which was then taking place mostly in monasteries, focused on rote memorisation of Pali texts,²¹⁷ the texts that constituted such a curriculum were but a fraction of the length of the Peṭ, which comes in at 154 pages in the Sixth Council edition in Burmese script. Recall that in the introduction it was mentioned that Htay Hlaing considered the Mingun Jetavana an “unknown *tipiṭakadhara*,” someone who had memorised the full Tipiṭaka and “held it” (P. *dhara*) in memory (Ṭheḥ lhuin [1961] 1993, 448). Whether factual or not, the purported memorisation of the Peṭ and the mental, subvocal composition of the commentary before writing it down is an integral aspect in the curation of the Mingun Jetavana’s legacy, for as Griffiths explains, “the repeated handling of manuscripts is said to be what people of lesser ability do: those of greater ability or talent memorize them and then reread by consulting the pages of memory” (Griffiths 1999, 122). In this sense, the Mingun Jetavana approached the Peṭ more like an object of meditation, for the “would-be-meditator” was often advised “to learn a text by heart

²¹⁷ In describing the curriculum of these texts, Tin Lwin explains that when a young boy is proficient in Burmese, “he [then] reads the Buddhist scriptures in Pali, beginning with the Buddhist formulas: the attributes of the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha. Then come the Maṅgalasutta, the Ratanapañjara, the Aṭṭhajaya, and the Namakkāra. After this he takes up the 11 suttas of the Paritta as well as the Jātaka, especially the 10 major ones, which are prescribed for him also” (Tin Lwin 1961, 38).

through verbal recitation as a strict precondition to successful ‘mental recitation’ that leads to full realization (*paṭivedha*). Textual memorization had a close link to meditation—they could be nearly equivalent” (Braun 2013, 136). This framing of the Peṭ as a meditation object, while partly figurative, is also a productive simile, since it adds a new dimension to how we might articulate the relationship between root text, commentary, and the exegete, who in this reading takes a more active part in mediating between the two.

To flesh out this simile even further, consider the ascetic approach that the Mingun Jetavana took to composing the Peṭ-a, an approach resembling that of Abhayadeva discussed by Dundas above. When he was ready to compose the commentary, then at the age of 50, the Mingun Jetavana decided to leave his busy meditation centre in Thaton for his native Mingun, in order “to live in solitude in a small cottage 10ft by 10ft with a 20ft-long veranda attached, in a remote place [far] away from [any] residential area” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 75). Demonstrating the seriousness of his endeavour, the Mingun Jetavana did not tell anyone of his departure, and “took nothing but one alms-bowl and three robes with him and left alone for the railway station” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 72). Yee Yee Win writes further that when the Mingun Jetavana “could recite the [Peṭ] by rote, he did not allow anyone to [meet with] him and strove to complete the commentary” (Yee Yee Win 2011, 174) in his remote, single-person dwelling, an act which took the Mingun Jetavana two years to complete (Bio trans. [1957] 2019, 77). It was no easy task, according to Tikkhacara, who claims that the Mingun Jetavana “worked very hard physically, verbally and mentally by writing th[is] Pāli commentary” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 23). Not surprisingly, this description of writing the Peṭ-a parallels the account of the Mingun Jetavana’s practice of *vipassanā* in the same biography, where it is said

that “he dwelled in a secluded place and put great effort in the intensive retreat for years until he gained the stages of penetrative insight” (Bio trans. [1957] 2019, 73).

Like the Jain exegete Abhayadeva, who worked on his commentary “through fasting, lack of sleep and intense exertion” (Dundas 1996, 82), the Mingun Jetavana viewed his own work as a sort of ascetic exercise—or at least this is how the episode is portrayed in the narratives about his life. Such an ascetic-like endeavor when composing commentary is not foreign to Buddhism, for David Fiordalis, discussing the story of Cakkhupāla in the commentary on the Pali *Dhammapada*, explains how the relationship between textual study and meditative practice “provides a narrative framework for contextualizing the overarching ascetic lifestyle” (Fiordalis 2019, 52). According to this framework, both study and meditation are seen as disparate but not diverging types of ascetic practices ultimately leading to the same goal. Turning to the story of Sthavira in the Sanskrit *Avadānaśataka*, Fiordalis claims that rather than textual learning and meditative practice standing in opposition, “specific doctrinal or propositional insights appear to reflect and legitimize specific achievements in practice” (Fiordalis 2019, 53). Applying this idea to the story behind the Mingun Jetavana’s composition of the Peṭ-a, his biographer appears to argue that his ability to memorise the text, compose the commentary first in his mind’s eye, and correct the many errors of the manuscripts, reflected his realisations wrought through meditation. This same idea is found in the *Vism*, where “Buddhaghosa states that a liberated person acquires an ability in language (*niruttipatisambhidā*) pertaining to Pāli” (Baba 2022a, 8). In a similar fashion to the Mingun Jetavana, the “demonstration of a point of doctrine becomes the measure of Sthavira’s attainment” (Fiordalis 2019, 53). A similar situation is also found in the *Mil* concerning the ability of Nāgasena to imbibe his first Buddhist teaching, for “he is given instructions in Buddhist metaphysics (*abhidharma*) aurally; and in short order he

is able to recite verbatim the entire corpus of works dealing with this topic” (Griffiths 1999, 116–17). The ability of Nāgasena to recite the Abhidhamma (S. *abhidharma*) after hearing it only once reflects his hard-won attainments, attainments which carried over from his previous lives and are the very reason he has been chosen to face Milinda in debate. The framework of asceticism is thus a generative way to understand the act of composing commentary since it was within an “overarching ascetic lifestyle” that the Mingun Jetavana approached and completed his Peṭ-a. This lifestyle, which included isolation, textual memorization, and the practice of *vipassanā*, cannot be separated from his undertaking of writing commentary. Returning to the idea of the last chapter, the Mingun Jetavana is represented as being capable of commenting on the Peṭ precisely because of his proficiency in *vipassanā* practice, approaching the writing of commentary as another form of mental development.

By many accounts, the Peṭ-a was well received. Ñāṇamoli writes that the Mingun Jetavana’s commentary “[c]onstantly [...] keeps coming to the rescue with ingenuity and

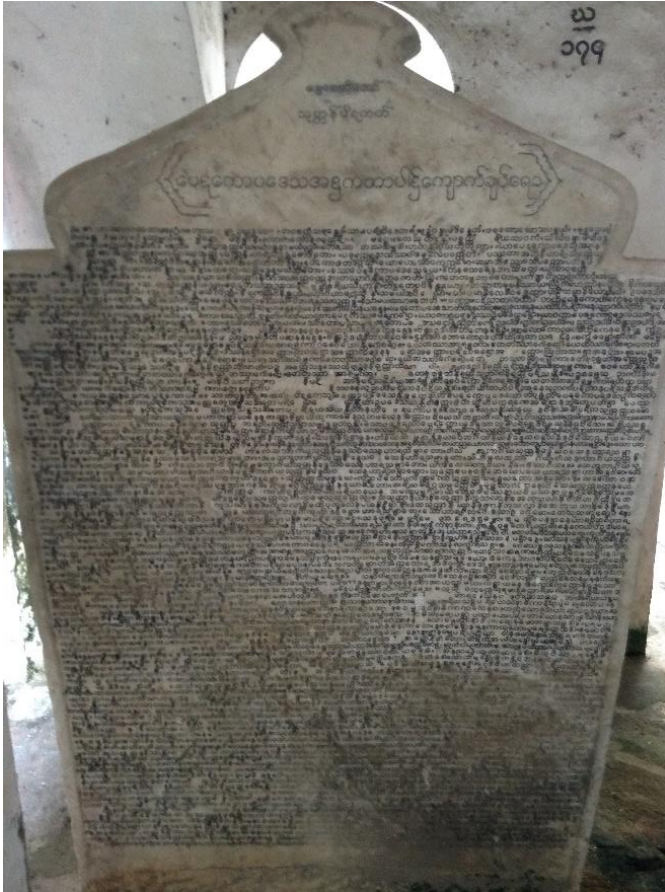


Figure 6 Stele of the Peṭ-a of the Mingun Jetavana, commissioned by U Khanti at the Sandamuni Pagoda. Photo by the author, 2018

judgement on numberless occasions” (Ñāṇamoli 1964, xx), aiding in Ñāṇamoli’s own translation of the Peṭ into English. In Burma itself, U Khanti (ဦးခန္တိ ၵh Khanti, 1876-1949), a semi-monastic hermit who was instrumental in the revival of numerous Buddhist historical and religious sites in the first half of the twentieth century, approached the Mingun Jetavana after reading the printed edition of the Peṭ-a and “asked for permission to inscribe the *Sayadaw*’s commentary on stone slabs. With the *Sayadaw*’s permission, the commentary was inscribed on 28 stone slabs” (Yee Yee Win 2011, 73).²¹⁸ These stelae were placed alongside

a complete set of the classical *aṭṭhakathās* in the *Candāmini cetī* (စန္ဒာမုနိစေတီ, hereafter the Sandamuni Pagoda), in the former royal capital of Mandalay, where they remain today (see

²¹⁸ It is also said that U Khanti further solicited the Mingun Jetavana to translate the Peṭ-a into Burmese, resulting in the three-volume *Peṭakopadesa-aṭṭhakathā-nissaya* published in 1936 (Bio trans. Hla Myint Tikkhācāra [1957] 2019, 78).

Figure 6). Citing this previous work in the *Nidānakathā* of the Mil-a, it is written that the Mingun Jetavana’s “commentary on the *Peṭakopadesa*, composed by this very noble *Mahāthera*, has also become very helpful for the teaching and is current [today].”²¹⁹ According to the hagiographical preface of the *Nibbān lamḥ ññvan*, “[t]his time was a proud and auspicious moment for Burma’s *sāsana*, since a Burmese born scholar, the Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw Gyi, filled in a major gap in the history of the scriptures [by adding the Peṭ-a], thereby becoming famous as a genius in *piṭaka* studies” (Unknown 2018, 2). As a result of his endeavour, at least according to those curating his legacy in the *Nibbān lamḥ ññvan*, “news of the publication of the *Peṭakopadesa Aṭṭhakathā* by the Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw Gyi spread to all the *piṭaka* scholars in various parts of Burma” (Unknown 2018, 2).²²⁰ What is crucial to note, however, is that the shared language deployed in the accounts of his practice of meditation and his composition of the Peṭ-a is not accidental; rather, it is a deliberate strategy to support the claims to enlightenment made on the Mingun Jetavana’s behalf by his devotees and those curating his legacy. In the eyes of his followers, the Mingun Jetavana’s ability to compose the first *aṭṭhakathā* in almost a millennium is, alongside his achievements in meditation, another sign of his ultimate spiritual status.

²¹⁹ *eteneva mahātheravarena viracitā peṭakopadesaṭṭhakathā pi sāsanaṣṣa bahūpakārā hutvā pavattateva* (Mil-a 2, 7-8)

²²⁰ The success of the Peṭ-a must be qualified, however, because the root text is of such a technical nature that its contents would not have been of interest outside of monastic and scholarly circles, and even then, to only a few people who specialised in commentary. Moreover, as Ñānamoli points out, “some of the commentator’s good emendations [...] are ignored by the editors” of the Sixth Council Edition of the *Peṭakopadesa* in 1956, even though the editors did decide “to include variant readings” (1964, xiv). In fact, the Peṭ-a was left out of the Sixth Council entirely, even though it did not invite the same controversy as the Mil-a. It is interesting to note, however, that when the task of editing the various texts for the Sixth Council were assigned, “the 12 members from Thaton Bhāṇaka Group recited *Peṭakopadesa Pāli Text*” (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 203). This choice is noteworthy because the Mingun Jetavana was based in Thaton at that time, and surely those monks from Thaton would have been familiar with the commentary of one of their local sayadaws.

5.3 Making the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*

According to the unknown author of the hagiographical preface to the *Nibbān lamḥ ññvan*, the success of the Peṭ-a is what led to the composition of the Mil-a by the Mingun Jetavan over a decade later, for

news [of the Peṭ-a] also reached the *Agga Mahā Paṇḍita* [i.e. a title awarded to leading monks in Burma for scholastic excellence], the Mohnyin Sayadaw Gyi of Monywa, who was flourishing in the *vipassanā* practice. He also read the *Peṭakopadesa Aṭṭhakathā* and was very pleased and encouraged. He said “*sādhu* [“well done”] many times and went to the Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw Gyi in Thaton to request him to compile the remaining *Milindapañhā* commentary. Such was the reason why the Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw Gyi wrote the *Milindapañhā Aṭṭhakathā*. (Unknown 2018, 2)

The “Mohnyin Sayadaw” (introduced in the last chapter as the Mohnyin) was an important early figure in the revival of *vipassanā* in Burma who began teaching around 1921. As the Mingun Jetavana was then based in Thaton, the Mohnyin was active in the same area of Mon State, Lower Burma, so the two were able to form a relationship. Indeed, the Mingun Jetavana relates the above story in the *Ganthārambhakathā (Discourse on the Undertaking of the Text)* in his Mil-a. There he versifies that he was “asked by the Mahāthera named Meghamanda [i.e. the Mohnyin] [to write this commentary], who was desirous of accomplishing a method for the fostering of the growth of listeners [i.e. the Buddhist community].”²²¹ As a result of this request, the Mingun Jetavana “started writing the commentary on *Milinda-Pañhā* in the year of 1300 (~1938/1939) when he was then exactly 70 years old, and finished this commentary of 505 pages [according to the 1949 edition in Burmese script] in 1303 (~1941/1942)” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 84). This account of an invitation to write a text from another monk is a common trope of commentarial composition and is echoed in the classical *aṭṭhakathās*,²²² where in one

²²¹ *sotūnaṃ vuḍḍhipattānaṃ nayaṃ sādhetukāmena/ meghamandena nāmena mahātherena yācito* (Mil-a 3, 9-10)

²²² In discussing the placement of such invitation accounts in the layout of the text, Cousins writes that they are usually found both in the preface and concluding verses, such as in the commentaries to the Vinayaṭṭakā, with the

such example, it is explained in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, that “The [Elder] Dāṭhānāga²²³ of the Sumaṅgalapariveṇa [i.e. the site of learning at Sumaṅgala] asked Buddhaghosa to write the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* on the *Dīghanikāya*, and this explains the title of this commentary”²²⁴ (von Hinüber 2013, 355). Hence just as the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* roughly 1500 earlier, the Mingun Jetavana claims not to have written the commentary of his own volition but because of the request of another leading member of the *saṅgha* at that time, thereby underwriting the composition as a whole. There is reason to further qualify this claim, however, given the aspiration that the Mingun Jetavana made after reading the Ledi’s *Paramatthadīpanī*, that “I will compile *Aṭṭhakathās* in *Pāḷi* when I [am] old enough,” but invoking the request of another senior monk is a motif in the *aṭṭhakathā* lineage that lends legitimacy and urgency to the Mingun Jetavana’s endeavour.

Returning to the view of the Mingun Jetavana as the quintessential commentator, the endeavour of composing the Mil-a was also furnished with more altruistic intentions. Recalling the apparently compassionate motivations of the Jain exegetes mentioned above, the Mingun Jetavana’s reasons for why he felt it necessary to compose the Mil-a are explained in the text’s

Nidānakathā:

For the sake of joy in seeing the happiness of all those who recite the texts, for the augmentation and increase of the teaching of the scriptures (*pariyatti*) that have become the root of the teachings on practice (*paṭipatti*) and attainment (*paṭivedha*) of the Buddha,

commentaries to the *Jātakas* and the *Dhammapada* only mentioning such invitations in the preface, while the commentaries to the *Khuddakapāṭha* and *Suttanipāta* do not include these accounts at all (Cousins 2013, 398).

²²³ Though little is known about the person of Dāṭhānāga, von Hinüber suggests that “[a]lthough this is nowhere stated, it is nevertheless likely that these monks might have been prominent representatives of the different *bhāṅaka* traditions for the individual *nikāyas*” (von Hinüber 2013, 358).

²²⁴ *āyācīto Sumaṅgalapariveṇavāsīnā thiragūṇena dāṭhānāgena saṅghatherena theriyavaṃsena* (Dīgha Nikāya, pāthikavaggaṭṭhakathā, 11. dasuttarasuttavaṇṇanā, nigamanakathā). This section of the text, as von Hinüber notes, does not appear in the PTS edition.

the Blessed One, who has caused to arise the impulse of great compassion (*mahākaruṇāvegāṃ*) in all beings, like the wisdom to be understood in all phenomena, for the purpose of satisfaction in reciting the various stories that expound the *dhamma*, for the purpose of answering without any trouble (*nirāyāsena*) the questions that have profound meanings, and to create indefatigability in hearers by the power of learning and retaining, this commentary on the *Milindapañha* has been thus well composed by the famous, noble *Mahāthera* Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw.²²⁵

In the above passage, the “impulse of great compassion” (P. *mahākaruṇāvegāṃ*) that the Buddha caused to arise in all beings is invoked in reference to the Mingun Jetavana’s composition of the Mil-a. Here again is an example of a commentarial conceit also found in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, where compassion is said to be the “proximate cause” of the Buddha’s “wisdom of teaching” (Sv trans. Bodhi [1978b] 2007, 97). In the *navatīkā*, or the “new subcommentary” to the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* attributed to Ñāṇābhivamsa,²²⁶ it is further explained at the beginning of the text’s treatment of exegetical methods that “[The origin is the source of the teaching (*desanānidāna*).] It is twofold: general and particular. The general origin is likewise twofold: the internal and the external. Herein, the internal general origin is the great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) of the Exalted One” (Sv-nt B^e trsl Bhikkhu Bodhi [1978] 2007, 215) (square brackets in original). Bodhi points out that this passage in the *aṭṭhakathā* and elaborated in the *navatīkā* is a reference to the deep logic of the Peṭ and the Nett (Bodhi [1978b] 2007, 215 ft. 159), with “origin” (P. *samutṭhāna*) coming first in a different list of commentarial techniques from the six strategies found in the beginning of the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*.

²²⁵ *tasmā sabbaññeyyadhammesu paññā viya sabbasattesu mahākaruṇāvegāṃ samuppādentassa buddhassa bhagavato paṭivedhapaṭipattisāsnānaṃ mūlabhūtaṃ pariyattisāsanassa vuddhiyā virūḷhiyā ganthavācakānaṃ sukholoکانena pāmojjatthāya dhammakathikānaṃ ca vicitrakathākathanena tosanatthāya gambhīratthānaṃ ca paññānaṃ nirāyāsena vissajjanatthāya sotūnaṃ ca uggahaṇadhāraṇādivasā akilamanatthāya miṅgun jetavun sayādāv iti vissutena mahātheravarenāyaṃ milindapañhaṭṭhakathā suṭṭhu viracitā hoti (Mil-a 1,^{31-2,7})*

²²⁶ Primoz Pecenko lists three different names for this text, the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī-navatīkā*, the *Silakkhandavagga-abhinava-īkā*, and the *Sādhijānavilāsinī* (Pecenko 2009, 29).

The invocation of the concept of *mahākaruṇā* in the Mil-a's *Nidānakathā* is meant to set up a collocation between the intent of the Buddha and the Mingun Jetavana, implying that it was the "internal" impulse of compassion inherited by the Buddha that motivated the Mingun Jetavana to compose his commentary. In other words, it was "for the sake of the joy" (P. *pāmojjatthāya*) that arises in the commentator upon seeing the happiness of others who might recite the Mil that the Mingun Jetavana undertook his task. Alluding to the Mingun Jetavana's own memorisation of the Peṭ before composing its commentary, the idea of learning the Mil by heart is also invoked in the *Nidānakathā*, since the power of learning and retaining it (P. *uggahaṇadhāraṇā*), of bearing it in mind and memory, is cited as one of the reasons why the Mingun Jetavana wrote his text. The Mingun Jetavana's call to memorise the Mil with the aid of its commentary shows that like the Peṭ, he also treated the root text like an object of meditation to be read aloud and borne in mind by its potential readership, for the word "uggaha," derived from the same verb as "uggahaṇa" in the compound above (viz. *uggaṇhāti*), is associated not just with learning, but especially with the act of "taking up, learning a subject for meditation" (CPD, s.v. *uggaha*). The oral style of the Pali and apparent dictation errors in the text suggest that like the Peṭ-a, the Mingun Jetavana composed the Mil-a in his mind's eye before writing it down on paper, indicating that he applied the same aesthetics of asceticism to this composition as he did to his first *aṭṭhakathā* more than twenty years earlier. All this is to say that for the Mingun Jetavana and those narrating his history, the memorisation of texts and the composition of commentaries was a form of practice and a way to display his high level of achievement. Finally, in the *Nidānakathā* the Mingun Jetavana claims that he is composing this commentary "for the augmentation and increase of the teaching of the scriptures (*pariyatti*) that have become the root of the teachings on practice (*paṭipatti*) and attainment (*paṭivedha*)." Though the threefold

formula of *pariyatti*, *paṭipatti*, and *paṭivedha* is a stock phrase in Burma, it is important here because the threefold formula shows that the Mingun Jetavana is not merely composing his *aṭṭhakathā* for textual learning or scholasticism, but because the text will support the practice of listeners, help them achieve indefatigability (P. *akilamana*), and realise their own attainments. When taken with the commentator’s exhortation to memorise this text and the broader definition of practice as “*bhāvanā*” discussed earlier, it is clear the Mingun Jetavana intended the Mil-a as an aid in the overall ascetic lifestyle that blends textual learning, memorization, and the assiduous practice of meditation.

In further support of this interpretation, the Mingun Jetavana was not only asked by a well-known teacher of *vipassanā* to compose the Mil-a, namely, the Mohnyin,²²⁷ but also requested another well-established meditation teacher to review the text for errors. Later in the *Nidānakathā*, it is explained that “at the time of printing (*muddāpana*) [this *aṭṭhakathā*], in the city of Yangon, the famous noble Mahāthera Insein Mingun Sayadaw, who has become the head of the *Paṭipatti Sāsanā Nuggaha Association*, has purified and prepared this [commentary].”²²⁸ Though the Insein Mingun Sayadaw (အင်းစိန်မင်းကွန်း ဆရာတော် Anḥ cin maṅḥ kvanḥ Cha rā tau, a.k.a., ဦး ဝိသုဒ္ဓိ ။ Visuddha, 1904-1958; hereafter the Insein Mingun²²⁹) was learned in

²²⁷ It is necessary to note that according to a newspaper article about a speech the Insein Mingun gave defending the Mil-a, the Mohnyin also reviewed the manuscript of this text for several months before the Insein Mingun (Bharī 1949, 16), but curiously, the Mingun Jetavana did not mention this fact in his *Nidānakathā*. It is curious because besides being known as a master of *vipassanā*, the Mohnyin was also awarded the title of *Agga Mahā Pandita*, which would have made him eminently qualified to review the text, a fact that the Mingun Jetavana would have wanted to mention to further support the legitimacy of his text.

²²⁸ *muddāpanakāle panāyaṃ raṅgūnanagare paṭipattisāsanānuggahasamitiyā padhānabhūtena insāin miṅgun sayādāv iti vissutena mahātheravarena sodhitābhisaṅkhatā ca* (Mil-a 2,⁹⁻¹¹)

²²⁹ The Insein Mingun later became known as the ‘Yangon Mingun Sayadaw,’ as his monastery and meditation centre moved from Insein township, then to the Shwedagon Pagoda, and eventually to central Yangon in 1950.

Pali, it is an indication of the Mingun Jetavana’s perspective on the role and function of this commentary that he would ask a monk who was the head of a powerful, monastic-lay meditation society to review and edit this text, rather than someone specifically associated with textual learning who might have been more competent in Pali. Even though it is also stated in the *Nidānakathā* that a lay-Pali scholar named Thān (တန) reviewed the text before print (Mil-a 2,¹¹⁻¹³), presumably the Mingun Jetavana had recourse to other more strictly scholastic monks who specialised in Pali composition. While the divide between monks who identified themselves more as scholastic and those who identified themselves more with meditation can be an artificial superimposition by scholars, the choice of reviewers is perhaps an indication of how the Mingun Jetavana understood his own role as commentator, which was not to ensure precise grammar and spelling so much as to adhere to the spirit of the letter, that is, according to the spirit of practice and attainment that will support the progress of his reading audience. Put another way, the Insein Mingun was to review the text not only for mistakes at the word level, but to ensure its non-contradiction and congruence with the Mingun Jetavana’s broader system of thought and practice, which included both the deep logic of the Peṭ and the Nett, and the “essence of the *dhamma*” in the form of *vipassanā* meditation. His task, therefore, was to ensure the meditative *sambandha* of the text as a whole.

This suggestion reinforces one of the conclusions of the last chapter, namely, that the Mingun Jetavana not only relied on the traditional methods of commentary as found in the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā*, but also made use of his own special insight—insight based on his skill as a meditator and the personal attainments he had achieved through the practice of *vipassanā*.

Indeed, it is implied as much to start the Mil-a when it is written that

just as five great rivers flow into the ocean, in the same way King Milinda, in the city named Sāgala, approached the elder Nāgasena and asked him questions that were

extremely subtle. And the questions and answers of these two great, wise men are very profound, penetrated [only] with difficulty and are not [easily] understood, [because these questions and answers] are like the Great Ocean which is not [easily] entered by hares, etc., by those of mean intelligence who have not heaped up (*anupacita*) the requisite ingredients of merit.²³⁰

This reference to the hares standing in front of the great ocean of wisdom is an allusion to a phrase appearing often in the classical *aṭṭhakathās*.²³¹ The hares represent “persons of little intelligence” who not only struggle to “gain a footing” in profound matters, as Heim explains (Heim 2018b, 51), but who equally fail to even recognise the depth of the ocean before them, their vision trapped at the surface level. Yet one of the reasons why the Mingun Jetavana invokes this image is to create a juxtaposition in the reader’s mind. The resulting impression is that the Mingun Jetavana is surely not one of these hares but is unique in being able to penetrate to the depths of the great ocean of wisdom that is the Mil. He reinforces this idea in verse in the *Ganthārambhakathā*, beginning with a requisite dose of humility before explicitly declaring his competency and vision in completing the task ahead:

Although that commentary on the question[s] of Milinda,
because of its profound nature, is difficult for me to know or to do,
[as] there is not any commentary anywhere on it that has been composed by the ancients,
therefore this commentary on the question[s] of Milinda
I will compose, not confused, adorned with various methods,
complete and with resolution—hear it from me, O virtuous ones!²³²

²³⁰ *seyyathā pi nāma pañcamahānadiyo sāgaram upagacchanti/ evameva kho milindo rājā sāgalanāmake nagare nāgasenattheramupagantvā atīva nipuṇe pañhe apucchi/ tesañca dvinnam mahāpaññānam pucchāvissajjanāyo atīva gambhīrā honti anupacitapuññasambhārehi mandabuddhīhi sasādīhi viya mahāsamuddo dukkhogāḥā alabbhaneyyapatiṭṭhā ca* (Mil-a 1,⁴⁻⁹)

²³¹ This same phrase, with some variations, can be found at Sv I 20,¹²⁻¹⁵, Sp I 23,¹⁻³, and As 22,¹⁴⁻¹⁵.

²³² *kiñcāpi yā milindassa pañhassa atthavañṇanā/
duttarā va mayā kātuṃ ñātuṃgambhīrabhāvato//
porāṇehi katā nesā natthesā tassa vañṇanā/
tasmā petam milindassa pañhassa atthavañṇanam//
anākulam karissāmi nānāyehi maṇḍitam/
sampuñnam nicchayeneva tam me suñātha sādhave ti//* (Mil-a 3,¹¹⁻¹⁶)

Why is the Mil-a so difficult to complete? Consider again the comments of Rhys Davids, Horner, and Levman from the first chapter, that many terms and phrases in the Mil are not found elsewhere in the Pali canon. The Mingun Jetavana did not have recourse to the *Tipiṭaka abhidhān*, the most exhaustive Pali-Burmese dictionary, and he was not aware of or did not subscribe to the methods of comparative philology. How then did he resolve these obscure terms and phrases in the root text he was commenting upon? He was not “confused” about the meaning of the Mil, I suggest, in part because he sees himself as having attained advanced stages on the path to *nibbāna*, which positions him as the ideal exegete for such an enigmatic text as the Mil and its problematic terminology. In other words, it is his special intimacy with and direct experience of the teachings of the Buddha that enables him to compose the Mil-a and claim the right to (re)interpret or clarify doctrine in light of his practice. If my line of thought is cogent, that the Mingun Jetavana was relying on his own special insight in part to compose his commentary, then one needs to ascertain the status of the Mingun Jetavana to know whether to accept the Mil-a and “hear it from” him directly, a bold declaration of the Mingun Jetavana’s capacity to comment on this text.

5.4 Special Edition of the *Burma Times*

The connection between the spiritual status of the Mingun Jetavana and the legitimacy of the Mil-a is a product of the fact that its publication caused immediate and widespread controversy in monastic and secular circles, leading the newly independent government to confiscate the first edition (Bollée 1969, 315; Bharī 1949) and allegedly pass or rush legislation in response (Huxley 2001, 134). This controversy erupted partly over calls for reforms on the robe-giving ceremony (P. *kaṭhina-kamma*) and the promotion of the higher ordination of women (P. *bhikkhuṇī-*

upasampadā) by the Mingun Jetavana, both of which went against the conventional view of the monastic elite at the time. Without yet going into further detail, it is sufficient to suggest that people had many reasons to object to the Mil-a, objections which ultimately pivoted on the enlightened status of its author. For in calling for reforms that fall outside of Theravada convention, or at least seem to fall outside of this convention, the Mingun Jetavana partly based his arguments on canonical precedent and his own special insight into the intentions of the Buddha when he (supposedly) laid down these precedents. As such, it is necessary to question the author's soteriological status in order to assess these extraordinary and controversial claims. Such a situation is exactly what is found in an extraordinary newspaper article ran in a special edition of the *Burma Times* on March 31st, 1955, a few weeks after the Mingun Jetavana's passing.²³³

²³³ This same episode is related in Htay Hlaing ([1961] 1993, 452–53), but since the newspaper predates Htay Hlaing's work, originally written in 1961, by six years, I think it is fair to say that this special edition was the source of Htay Hlaing's reporting on this conversation, or at least that they shared a common source, which possibly indicates that this conversation was widely known in monastic and lay-Buddhist circles at that time.

This special edition consists of a three-page obituary titled *Rahantā arhañ mūla mañh kvanḥ cha rā tau bhu rā krīḥ* (ရဟန္တာအရှင် မူလမင်းကွန်းဆရာတော်ဘုရားကြီး *The Great Original Mingun Sayadaw the Arahant*) (1955, 1) (see fig. 7). The article not only relates the major moments and accomplishments of the Mingun Jetavana’s career as a monk but also lays out the case—in print—that he was a fully enlightened being of the twentieth century, an *arahant* who had reached the highest stage on the path of Theravada Buddhism. Yet what is extraordinary is not so much that the editors of the *Burma Times* circulated this argument in

public, but that they used the words of the Mingun Jetavana to do so. The fact that this article was published just after the passing of the Mingun Jetavana demonstrates the sensitive nature of making such a claim in the public sphere, especially using the words of the subject in question. Such sensitivity stems from an injunction in the Vinayapīṭaka that prohibits a monk to falsely claim their own “superhuman” (P. *uttarimanussa-dhammaṃ*) attainments, resulting in a *pārājika* offence,²³⁴ the most serious ecclesiastical transgression warranting the disrobing of the guilty



Figure 7 Front Page of the Special edition of the *Burma Times*, March 31st, 1955

²³⁴ The relevant passage in Vin I 91,¹⁸⁻²⁵ about this fourth and final *pārājika* reads: “Whatever monk should boast, with reference to himself of a state of further-men [i.e. a super-human state], sufficient ariyan knowledge and insight, though not knowing it fully, and saying: ‘This I know, this I see,’ then if later on, he, being pressed or not being pressed, fallen, should desire to be purified, and should say: ‘Your reverence, I said that I know what I do not

individual.²³⁵ While the rule in question specifically states that one cannot *falsely* claim attainments, the seriousness of the offence means in practice that one does not publicly claim any attainment at all, since to do so could invite censure and blame from others and is almost impossible to prove one way or another.²³⁶ Hence for these reasons, the investigation of the status of the Mingun Jetavana is not directly broached or confirmed but carried out obliquely by deduction, as the article below demonstrates.

Titled, “A Great Enlightened Person” (*Rahantā pugguil krīḥ* ရဟန္တာပုဂ္ဂိုလ်ကြီး) (1955, 2), the most remarkable aspect of the section where the conversation about the soteriological status of the Mingun Jetavana is relayed in the special edition is that it begins with the controversy over the Mil-a. By referencing the *Kathina-vinicchaya* (*Judgement on Kaṭṭhina*),²³⁷ a form of commentary resembling a “legal decision” written by the Mingun Jetavana to explain his reforms for the robe-giving ceremony (*kaṭṭhina kamma*) from the perspective of the monastic code and other relevant canonical and paracanonical texts, the interviewer initiates the exchange by raising

know, see what I do not see, I spoke idly, falsely, vainly,’ apart from the undue estimate of himself, he also is one who is defeated, he is not in communion” (Vin trans. Horner [1938] 1949, I:159).

²³⁵ Discussing the gravity of this fourth *pārājika*, Heim writes that “[w]hat makes this particular violation of the boasting monks rise to the level of a defeat—other lies are considered lesser infractions—is that it, like the other defeats, strikes at the heart of the ethical and institutional foundations of the Saṅgha. For a monk to claim arhatship, thereby secure the esteem of others, and then be observed backsliding is to bring the entire monastic project into question” (Heim 2014, 167).

²³⁶ Indeed, the stakes are so high in regard to this *pārājika* that the Burmese state has become involved in recent decades. Janaka Ashin points to the case of an Ūḥ Sūriya, the abbot of a *vipassanā* center in Yangon active in the 1970s, who was defrocked by the state-backed monastic court system for claiming publicly to have reached the stage of *arahatta*, which was deemed a false statement by a committee of monks versed in *vinaya* jurisprudence (Janaka Ashin 2016, 196).

²³⁷ While International Pali spelling uses the retroflex *ṭh* for the word *kaṭṭhina*, it is conventional in Burma to see two different spellings of this term, with *ṭh* and with the voiceless dental aspirate *th*, which is what is seen in the sources in question here.

the controversy around the Mil-a (or at least this is where the editors decide to begin their coverage):

It is said, [people] were not satisfied, not pleased with the *dhamma* writing of the Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw, the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā Kathina-vinicchaya*. At the time when the Great Sayadaw was informed [of this], it is said that because he had nobly performed the *dhamma* giving much consideration to all the worldly matters, at the age of 84, he did not speak a word to anybody [about this controversy], [but was] in a state of silence for two years [about this text]. While remaining silent [about this issue], [some visitors] visited the monk at [that] place and one of them said: “When you heard that it was said [people] were not in agreement with the *Kathina-vinicchaya* written by Ashin Sayadaw [i.e. the Mingun Jetavana], how did you feel?” The Pheya [i.e. the Mingun Jetavana] said the following.²³⁸ (1955, 2)

The first important point to note from this exchange is the connection the interrogator makes between two of the Mingun Jetavana’s publications, the Mil-a and the *Kathina-vinicchaya* (*Judgement on Kathina*). While the *Kathina-vinicchaya* was published separately from the Mil-a, the *Kathina-vinicchaya* stems from arguments the Mingun Jetavana makes in his earlier commentary.²³⁹ In fact, the judgement text was composed precisely to respond to the controversy that erupted over his commentary. In this sense, the *Kathina-vinicchaya* is an extension of the Mil-a, or rather, a form of vernacular, auto-subcommentary. Hence by invoking the *Kathina-vinicchaya*, the interrogator is invoking the controversy surrounding the Mil-a in toto.

²³⁸ ထိုမင်းကွန်း ဆရာတော်ရေး မိလိန္ဒပဉ္စ အဋ္ဌကကာ[sic]-ကထိန ဝိနိစ္ဆယကို မကျေနပ် မနှစ်သက်ကြဟု-ဆရာတော်ကြီး ကြားသိတော်မူသောအခါ၊ လောက ကိစ္စ အဝဝသည် အလွန် ဆန်းကျယ်လှပေတကားဟု တရားသံဝေ ယူတော်မူ၍ သက်တော် ၈၄ နှစ်တွင်မည်သူနှင့် မျှ စကစး²³⁸[sic]မပြောတော့ဘဲ တုဏှိ ဘာဝေ ၂ နှစ် မျှ ဆိတ် ဆိတ် သာသီတင်းသုံးလျက် နေရာတွင်အဖူး အမျှန်ရောက်လျာသောကိုယ်တော်တပါးက အရှင်ဆရာတော် ရေးသား သော ကထိန ဝိနိစ္ဆယကို သဘောမကျကြဟု ကြားရတဲ့အခါ ဘယ်လိုစိတ် ထား ပါ သလဲ ဘုရားဟု လျှောက်၏ (1955, 2).

²³⁹ The only extant edition of the *Kathina-vinicchaya* is from 1957, published posthumously in a collection of the Mingun Jetavana’s monastic judgements called the *Vinaya samūha vinicchaya* (*Collection of Judgements on the Vinaya*), but the identification of the *Judgement on Kathina* with the Mil-a in this dialogue, along with a *Kathina-nissaya* published by the Mingun Jetavana in 1954, makes it likely that the *Kathina-vinicchaya* was published by the Mingun Jetavana shortly after his Mil-a.

The second point to note is the report that the Mingun Jetavana apparently remained silent about this controversy for two years following the publication of the Mil-a in 1949. If true, that would put the date of this conversation sometime after 1950, with Htay Hlaing offering the date of 1315 ME, which could be sometime in either 1953 or 1954 (Theḥ lhuin̄ [1961] 1993, 452) depending on the month of the Burmese calendar these events took place. To better appreciate the nature of the following exchange and the sophisticated Theravada cosmological and soteriological theories invoked, the identity of the “visitor” asking the questions is paramount. While the special edition does not mention any names in this regard, perhaps aware of the contentious nature of the exchange, Htay Hlaing states in his 1961 collection of biographies that

since [the Mingun Jetavana] had then become advanced in age, Sayadaw Ūḥ Medhāvī,²⁴⁰ who was a great disciple of the Sāsanā Mār Aoṅ Meditation Monastery in Kamayut [Township], Yangon, with a strong desire to know the *dhamma* status of the [Mingun Jetavana] Sayadaw, had formally addressed to the Sayadaw Pheya Gyi as follows.²⁴¹ (Theḥ lhuin̄ [1961] 1993, 452).

This Ūḥ Medhāvī (ဦးမေဓာဝီ hereafter Medhavi), who is otherwise unknown to me apart from this reference, is keen to discern the “*dhamma* status” (တရားအခြေအနေ *ta rāḥ akhre ane*) of the Mingun Jetavana, in part because of the latter’s old age, and possibly, because of his own practice of meditation, possibly based in the same or related lineage of the Mingun Jetavana. The term “*dhamma* status” is a little difficult to interpret, since it could mean the “status of the Mingun Jetavana’s teachings,” or even “the legal status of the Mingun Jetavana,” but given how

²⁴⁰ This Ūḥ Medāvī is not to be confused with the Nyaunglun Sayadaw, who died 20 years before this exchange but had the same Pali name.

²⁴¹ ရောက်သောအခါ သက်ရှယ်တော်လည်း ကြီးပြီဖြစ်၍ ဆရာတော်၏တရားအခြေအနေကို သိလိုလှသဖြင့် ရန်ကုန် ကမာရွတ် သာသနာ့မာရ်အောင်ကမ္မဋ္ဌာန်းကျောင်းတိုက် တပည့်ကြီးတစ်ပါးဖြစ်သူ ဦးမေဓာဝီ ဆရာတော်က ဆရာတော် ဘုရားကြီးအားအောက်ပါအတိုင်း လျှောက်ထားခဲ့ဖူး၏ (Theḥ lhuin̄ [1961] 1993, 492).

the exchange unfolds, it appears Medhavi wanted to know before the latter’s passing, quite bluntly, whether the Mingun Jetavana was an *arahant* or not, in part to determine how he himself should evaluate the controversial texts published by the Mingun Jetavana and the latter’s contentious calls for reform.

The Mingun Jetavana replies to the query of Medhavi by saying that he “does not give [the controversy] any thought” and states matter-of-factly that he neither agrees nor disagrees with the accusations of his critics (1955, 2).²⁴² This reply, in both its brevity and unwillingness to engage, rhetorically signals that the Mingun Jetavana is beyond such worldly matters—that he knows himself whether his views are right or wrong and does not require third-party praise or confirmation. The reply is meant to depict the Mingun Jetavana as above the fray, sort to speak, keeping in line with his public persona as a teacher of *vipassanā* and a living *arahant*. Yet what is remarkable about the quote above is that this episode directly segues into a discussion about the Mingun Jetavana’s personal spiritual status, an ostensibly unrelated matter to the controversy around his commentary. The linking of the controversy over these texts and the attainments of their author indicates that for Medhavi and the editors of the *Burma Times*, the validity of the Mingun Jetavana’s controversial reforms found in the Mil-a are directly tied to the soteriological position of the commentator himself. The dialogue proceeds as follows:

Question: “The Great Elders of the [Sixth] Council (*saṃgāyanā mahātheras*) are considering including the *Dhammadāsa* [sic] *Sutta* in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, I wish to know how [you] view [this matter], Pheya?”

Answer: “I cannot say at all, I cannot speak [to this issue] at all”

Question: “According to the *Dhammadāsa* [sic] *Sutta*, if one has become a *sotāpanna* [i.e. a stream-enterer, one who has reached the first stage of the path], it is permitted for

²⁴² ဘယ်လိုမှစိတ်မထားပါ (1955, 2).

one to declare themselves a *sotāpanna*, [but] are noble people permitted [to do so]? Or is it permitted for every [lay] person and monk [to declare as much], Pheya?”²⁴³ (1955, 2)

Medhavi here develops his investigation into the status of the Mingun Jetavana by soliciting the latter’s views on the *Dhammādāsa Sutta* (*Discourse on the Mirror of the Dhamma*), embedded within the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (*Discourse on the Great Complete Nibbāna*) of the *Dīghanikāya* (*Long Discourses [of the Buddha]*),²⁴⁴ which recounts the final months of the Buddha’s life. The *Dhammādāsa Sutta* is also reproduced in the *Samyuttanikāya* (*Connected Discourse [of the Buddha]*), where it is found within a section of texts on the characteristics of the stage of stream-entry (P. *sotāpatti*) called *Sotāpattisaṃyuttaṃ* (*Connected [Discourses] on the Stage of Stream Entry*), specifically, as the *Giñjakāvasatha Sutta* (*Discourse on the House Made of Bricks*). Since this text is found in both the Sixth Council (P. *chaṭṭha-saṅgāyanā*) edition of Pali texts in Burma and the editions of the Pali Text Society, it is unclear why Medhavi mentioned that the “Great Elders of the [Sixth] Council are considering including the *Dhammadāsa* [sic] *Sutta* in the *Samyutta Nikāya*,” since the Pali Text Society edition

²⁴³ မေး။ ။ သံယုတ္တနိကာယ်၌ ဓမ္မဒါသသုတ်ကိုသံဂါယနာတ် မထေရ် တို့ ထည့်သွင်းထားပုံ မှာ အကြောင်း ပြဘယ်လိုဟုသိလိုပါတယ်ဘုရား၊

ဖြေ။ ။ မဆိုတတ်တော့ဘူး။မပြောတတ်တော့ဘူး။

မေး။ ။ ဓမ္မဒါသ သုတ်အရ မိမိ ကိုယ်ကို သောတာပန် ဖြစ် လျှင် ငါ သောတာပန်ဖြစ်တယ်လို့ ပြော ခွင့်ပြု သည်မှာ လူအရိယာများကို အခွင့်ပြု ပါသလား။ သို့မဟုတ် လူ ရှင် ရဟန်း အားလုံးကို ခွင့်ပြုပါသလားဘုရား (1955, 2).

²⁴⁴ According to G.P. Malalasekara, there is another *sutta* by the same name alternatively known as the *Catuparivaṭṭa Sutta*, the *Bahudhātuka Sutta*, the *Amataḍundubhi Sutta*, or the *Anuttara-Saṅgāmajjaya Sutta* (DPPN, s.v. *bahudhātuka sutta*), but these two are not the same text, since the *Bahudhātuka Sutta* in the *Majjhimanikāya* (M III 67) does not mention anything about the self-declaration of *sotāpatti*, but focuses on how one comes to know the different types of elements (*dhātus*). To further complicate the situation, in his *Handbook of Pali Literature*, von Hinüber refers to a *Catuparivaṭṭa Sutta* (i.e. the *Bahudhātuka Sutta*) under the heading “Apocryphal Texts from Thailand,” explaining that “the phenomenon as such, that is Suttantas existing outside the canon, seems to be very old [...], [but they] were not included in the canon during the first three councils (*tisso saṃgātiyo anārūlhe*, Sp 742,24)” (von Hinüber 2000, 201). Since the *Catuparivaṭṭa-cum-Bahudhātuka Sutta* is firmly entrenched in the *Majjhimanikāya* and does not ‘exist outside the canon,’ perhaps there are multiple texts circulating with overlapping names but different contents?

predates the Sixth Council edition by almost 60 years. Here is the relevant section of the

Dhammādāsa Sutta alluded to by Medhavi as found in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*:

Ānanda, it is not remarkable that that which has come to be as a man should die. But that you should come to the Tathagata to ask the fate of each of those who have died, that is a weariness to him. Therefore, Ānanda, I will teach you a way of knowing Dhamma, called the Mirror of Dhamma, whereby the Ariyan disciple, if he so wishes, can discern of himself: "I have destroyed hell, animal-rebirth, the realm of ghosts, all downfall, evil fates and sorry states. I am a Stream-Winner [*sotāpanna*], incapable of falling into states of woe, certain of attaining Nibbāna.²⁴⁵ (D trans. Walshe 1995, 241)

A *sotāpanna* ("stream-entrant") is someone who has realised the first of four stages on the path that culminates in enlightenment, namely, in the stage of *arahatta* (i.e., that of being an *arahant*).²⁴⁶ The context of this discourse in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* is that the Buddha has been asked by his attendant Ānanda about the various attainments of nuns, monks, and lay followers who have recently died in the area they are visiting (Nādikā). In response, the Buddha lists the four stages of the path and their characteristics, starting with *arahatta* and ending with the stage of *sotāpatti* (i.e., the stage of being a stream-entrant), a formula usually given in the opposite order. As a result of this enumeration, the *Dhammādāsa Sutta* is integral for those teaching and practicing meditation, for according to a translation of the Mahasi's discourse on the *Ariyāvāsa Sutta* (*Discourse on the Abodes of the Noble Ones*), "[i]t is up to the yogī [meditator] to examine himself on the basis of the Dhammadaśa [Sutta] and the stages of insight-knowledge on the Noble Path. (Dhammadaśa is the Buddha's sermon on how to evaluate one's

²⁴⁵ *anacchariyaṃ kho panetaṃ, ānanda, yaṃ manussabhūto kālaṅkareyya. tasmīṃyeva kālaṅkate tathāgataṃ upasaṅkamitvā etamatthaṃ pucchissatha, vihesā hesā, ānanda, tathāgatassa. tasmātihānanda, dhammādāsaṃ nāma dhammapariyāyaṃ desessāmi, yena samannāgato ariyasāvako ākaṅkhamāno attanāva attānaṃ byākareyya — 'khīṇanirayomhi khīṇatiracchānāyoni khīṇapettivisayo khīṇāpāyaduggativinipāto, sotāpannohamasmi avinipātadhammo niyato sambodhiparāyaṇo 'ti (D II 93,¹¹⁻²⁰)*

²⁴⁶ The four stages in question begin with *sotāpatti* ("stream-entrance"), followed by *sakadāgāmitā* ("once-returning"), then *anāgāmitā* ("non-returning"), and finally, culminating in the stage of *arahatta*, or enlightenment. Those who have reached these stages are known as *sotāpannas*, *sakadāgāmins*, *anāgāmins*, and *arahants* respectively.

spiritual progress on the path). In this way he [or she] can find out whether or not he [or she] has attained the spiritual level promised by his [or her] teacher” (Ari trans. Aye Maung 1993, npg). In other words, the practitioner can use the different characteristics of the four stages of the path outlined in the *Dhammādāsa Sutta* to assess her or his own progress in the practice of meditation.²⁴⁷

In response to this line of questioning about the *Dhammādāsa Sutta* and as a meditation teacher himself, the Mingun Jetavana accepts the premise of this text, replying that

Answer: “It is permitted for anyone [who has attained the stage of *sotāpatti* to openly declare as much], both for a [lay] person or monk”

Question: “If a monk honestly speaks about the occurrence of realising the fruits of the path (*magga*) and the state[s] of total absorption (*jhāna*), it is proper to say that there is no misdeed, [no] ecclesiastical offence (*āpatti*), [no] inappropriate[ness] [here], is it not?”

Answer: “It is proper to say [that there is no fault here].”²⁴⁸ (1955, 2)

Although the *Dhammādāsa Sutta* stipulates that one can openly declare that one has reached the stage of *sotāpatti*, it does not explicitly state whether the same is permitted for the subsequent stages of the path, nor for the states of total absorption (*jhānas*).²⁴⁹ Yet the Mingun Jetavana,

²⁴⁷ There is also a similar passage in the *Gahapativagga* in the *Samyuttanikāya* where the Buddha tells Anathapiṇḍika, the generous merchant: “Householder, when five fearful animosities have subsided in a noble disciple, and he possesses the four factors of stream-entry, and he has clearly seen and thoroughly penetrated with wisdom the noble method, if he wishes he could by himself declare of himself: ‘I am one finished with hell, finished with the animal realm, finished with the domain of ghosts, finished with the plane of misery, the bad destinations, the nether world. I am a stream-enterer, no longer bound to the nether world, fixed in destiny, with enlightenment as my destination’” (S trans. Bodhi 2000, 1:578).

²⁴⁸ ဖြေ။ ။ လူ၊ ရှင်၊ ရဟန်း အားလုံးကို ခွင့်ပြုတော်မူတယ်။

မေး။ ။ ရဟန်း အဖြစ်ဖြင့် ဈာန်မဂ်ဖိုလ်ရကြောင်းကို ရိုး သား စွာပြောလျှင် အပြစ်မရှိ အာပတ် မသင့်တဲ့ အတွက် ပြောဆိုထိုက်တယ်မဟုတ်ပါလား သူရား။

ဖြေ။ ။ ပြောဆိုထိုက်တယ် (1955, 2).

²⁴⁹ The relationships between the stages of the path and the states of total absorption is not always laid out in either the Tipiṭaka or commentarial literature, with certain inconsistencies and even contradictions arising which later exegetes attempt to smooth over. For a detailed discussion on this relationship, see Amrita Nanda (2017).

according to his answer above, seems to have accepted the idea that one could declare having achieved the subsequent higher stages as well, as long as one is being sincere. Though this statement is not explicitly sanctioned in the text, one could argue that the self-declaration of the other stages is a logical conclusion of the Buddha's statement in the *Dhammādāsa Sutta*, and indeed, given the fact that the Buddha outlines the characteristics of all four stages in detail just before this statement, the omission of his permission that a *sakadāgāmin* ("once-returner"), *anāgāmin* ("non-returner"), or *arahant* ("liberated person") can also declare their status is rather curious. By accepting the extrapolation of what is permitted by the *Dhammādāsa Sutta*, the Mingun Jetavana tacitly enables the dialogue to move further into his own status:

Question: "Is there a wish [for the] Sayadaw Pheya to be [in the Brahma Realm] as a Brahma?"

Answer: "No, there is not"

Question: "In years past, was there [such] a wish to become a *brahmā* [in the Brahma Realm], Pheya?"

Answer: "There was before."²⁵⁰ (1955, 2)

Above is an example of the oblique means by which the interviewer inquires into the attainments won by the Mingun Jetavana, which is meant to sidestep any monastic restrictions on the prohibition of such declarations, of which Medhavi was surely aware. For as the Mahasi Sayadaw writes in the second volume of his *Treatise on the Method of Vipassana Insight Meditation*, a monk "can speak of his being an ariya [i.e. someone who has reached one of the four stages on the path] only if it is not [...] contrary to Bhūtārocana sikkhāpada or [the]

²⁵⁰ မေး။ ။ ဆရာတော်ဘုရားမြဟော ဖြစ်လိုတဲ့ဆန္ဒရှိပါသလား ဘုရား။

ဖြေ။ ။ မဖြစ်လိုဘူး။

မေး။ ။ ရှေးကကော ဖြစ်လိုတဲ့ဆန္ဒရှိခဲ့ဘူးပါသလား ဘုရား။

ဖြေ။ ။ ဖြစ်လိုခဲ့ဘူးတယ် (1955, 2).

precept[s] as contained in the Vinaya” (Meth trans. Min Swe 1970, 2:198). The “*bhūtārocana sikkhāpadaṃ*” here refers to the eighth *pācittiya* rule in the *Bhikkhupātimokkha* (*Code of Discipline for Monks*), which states that “[i]f any bhikkhu should declare a superhuman state to one who has not been fully admitted [into the community of monks], [even] when it is a fact, [this is a case] involving expiation”²⁵¹ (Vin trans. Ñāṇatusita 2014, 102) (square brackets in original). This *pācittiya* offense, which requires a public confession to resolve and is a relatively minor offence, is related to the much-more-serious fourth *pārājika*, which states a monk must not *falsely* declare a “superhuman state” (*P. uttarimanussadhammaṃ*),²⁵² whether to another monastic or lay person. While subtle, the difference between these two offenses is crucial, accounting for the disparate degree of punitive action taken against the offender; for the word ‘*bhūtārocana*’ means “a declaration that is factual,” indicating that even if a monk has actually reached a certain stage on the path, they are still not permitted to declare it to someone who is not ordained.²⁵³ Hence, because of the public nature of this exchange recounted in the special edition, or at least the potential of it becoming public, rather than ask him whether he is an *anāgāmin* (“non-returner”) directly, which is two stages above being a *sotāpanna* (“stream-entrant”), Medhavi, himself steeped in Buddhist soteriology, cosmology, and *vinaya* regulations,

²⁵¹ *yo pana bhikkhu anupasampannassa uttarimanussadhammaṃ āroceyya bhūtasmiṃ, pācittiyaṃ* (Vin IV 25,²²⁻²³)

²⁵² The exact nature of ‘*uttarimanussadhammaṃ*’ is explained as “*uttarimanussadhammo nāma jhānaṃ, vimokkha, samādhi, samāpatti, ñānadassanaṃ, maggabhāvanā, phalacchikiriyā, kilesappahānaṃ, vinīvaraṇatā cittassa, suññāgāre abhirati*” (Vin IV 25,²⁷⁻²⁸), which includes both the states of total absorption (*jhāna*) and the four fruits of the path (*phalacchikiriyā*) referenced by the interrogator in the *Burma Times*’ special edition above.

²⁵³ There is in fact evidence of the Mingun Jetavana privately telling his disciple, the monk U Tikkhacara, of his belief in his own personal attainments, which is not a transgression of the eighth *pācittiya*, since the latter is fully ordained. In his biography of the Mingun Jetavana, Tikkhacara notes that the Mingun Jetavana “had practiced *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation intensively for three consecutive years from the age of 37 until he accomplished his purpose at the age of 40. In this regard, Sayādawji himself once said to me that he was satisfied with his spiritual achievement at the age of 40” (Bio trans. Hla Myint 2019, 24).

uses an indirect reference, asking instead whether the Mingun Jetavana has aspirations to become a *brahmā*, a default goal for any monk or nun.²⁵⁴

It is a default goal because becoming a *brahmā* means to be reborn into the “pure abode” (P. *suddhāvāsa*) of the Brahmā Realm (P. *brāhmaloka*). According to the *Buddhabhāsa vohāra mran mā-aṅga lip cvay cuṃ abhidhān* (ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာ ဝေါဟာရ မြန်မာ-အင်္ဂလိပ် စွယ်စုံ အဘိဓာန် *Myanmar-English Encyclopedic Dictionary of Buddhist Terms*), “[a] person is called ‘*brahmā*’ who is away from seven things: 1: Personal-existence view is away from him; 2: doubt is away from him; 3. wrong grasp of observances is away from him; 4: lust is away from him; 5: hatred is away from him; 6: delusion is away from him; 7: conceit is away from him” (MEED, s.v. ဗြဟ္မဏမည်ခြင်း၏ အကြောင်းတရား ၇ ပါး). This list corresponds to seven of the 10 *saṃyojanas* (“fettors”) that cause and bind the individual to existential suffering in *saṃsāra*, though there is some discrepancy between this list and those found in the Nikāyas. In essence, then, becoming a *brahmā* is to approach the status of an *arahant*, to be free from the three *akusala-mūlas* (“unwholesome roots”) of action, also known as the “three fires” of *dosa* (“hatred”), *lobha* (“greed”), and *moha* (“delusion”), to be without a view of the self, and to have no “religious” doubt, especially about one’s own state of attainments. However, I must stress “approach” the state of *arahatta*, because being reborn in the Brahmā Realm means that one is not an *arahant* yet—one who is free from all 10 *saṃyojanas*—but rather, is still an *anāgāmin*, meaning one who will not be reborn in the Human Realm of sensual pleasures (P. *kāmaloka*), but in the Brahmā

²⁵⁴ The omission of a set of questions to establish whether the Mingun Jetavana believes himself a *sakadāgāmin* is not surprising, for the stage of *sakadāgāmitā* is considered an “arbitrary” fit in the fourfold scheme (Amrita Nanda 2017, 109). For further discussion on this matter, see Amrita Nanda, who concludes that “originally [the] gap between the stage of stream-enterer and non-returner might have been very narrow, almost indistinguishable” (Amrita Nanda 2017, 110).

Realm, where there are no such pleasures to distract from the final goal of liberation. Although there are no sensual pleasures in the Brahmā Realm, the *anāgāmin* is born into the sphere of form (P. *rūpāvacara*), which means they are still embodied beings, though with a lifespan measured in world cycles (P. *kappas* S: *kalpas*) rather than years.²⁵⁵ This linkage between the stage of *anāgāmitā* and the Brahmā Realm is not surprising, as Amrita Nanda remarks that the “development of the [*anāgāmitā*] concept would entail a simultaneous development in cosmology,” indeed, that the two developed together (Amrita Nanda 2017, 115). Hence once in the Brahmā Realm, the *anāgāmin* will necessarily become an *arahant*, destined to finish their spiritual journey without risk of regressing to any of the earlier stages.

The stakes are even higher in this line of questioning, however, because according to the *Vism*, “there is no rebirth in the Brahmā Realm without [having first achieved] *jhāna*” (*jhānaṃ vinā n'atthi brahmaloke nibbatti*) (*Vism* 415,¹⁴). Linking rebirth in the Brahmā Realm with the realization of at least the first *jhāna* is problematic, because if all *anāgāmins* are reborn in the Brahmā Realm, does that mean all *anāgāmins*, even those who practice dry-insight (P. *sukkhavipassaka*), have also developed at least the first *jhānic* absorption? Amrita Nanda explains that the “Pāli *Nikāyas* do not specify the requirement of *jhānas* [...] for the attainment of the stage of [*anāgāmitā*]” (Amrita Nanda 2017, 127), but they do say state that in order to be reborn in the *brāhmaloka*, one needs to have “skills in attaining *jhānas*” (Amrita Nanda 2017, 129). Not only that, but according to the *Nikāyas*, it is necessary for the *anāgāmin* to “have attained at least the

²⁵⁵ The span of a *kappa* is usually translated as an “aeon,” defined as the length of a world-system. Though there is not exact timespan stipulated, the Buddha offers in the way of an illustration the following simile at SN XV 5, “Suppose, bhikkhu, there was a great stone mountain a *yojana* long, a *yojana* wide, and a *yojana* high, without holes or crevices, one solid mass of rock. At the end of every hundred years a man would stroke it once with a piece of Kāsian cloth. That great stone mountain might by this effort be worn away and eliminated but the aeon [*kappa*] would still not come to an end. So long is an aeon [*kappa*], bhikkhu” (S trans. Bodhi 2000, 1:654).

first four *jhānas*” (Amrita Nanda 2017, 129), namely, the states of total absorption of form (P. *rūpajjhānas*), which is why they are still reborn in the sphere of form. If so, then the question for the Mingun Jetavana in this special edition is not just whether he had achieved the state of *anāgamitā*, but whether he had achieved the first four *jhānic* states, and by extension, at least the first *abhiññā*. Hence this two-tiered question is not just probing whether the Mingun Jetavana has reached the stage of *anāgamitā* but whether he has also accessed the *abhiññās*, without explicitly asking as much. It is a two-tiered question because Medhavi makes sure that the Mingun Jetavana had a desire to be reborn in Brāhma Realm in the past, which he did, while the absence of such a desire at present implies that the Mingun Jetavana has reached his goal—that he is at least an *anāgāmin*, and moreover, that he has mastered the first four *jhānas*, unlocking the supernatural *abhiññās* in the process.

Having brought the dialogue to this penultimate stage, the interviewer next puts forth a series of questions designed to confirm whether the Mingun Jetavana believes himself to have reached the highest stage, that of *arahatta*, without forcing him to directly declare as much:

Question: “it would be good if one is able to be a *brahmā* in the Pure Abode, is it not, Pheya?”

Answer: The Great Sayadaw, sitting up in his chair, when after lowering his head, got ready and raised his head [again], [saying]: “Yes, I suppose it must be said [that] being [reborn in] the Pure Abode [as] a Brahma is probably fine enough. But it is lacking, this is good in itself only for those ones whose knowledge is not sufficient enough, [for them] it is good. However, for those whose knowledge is sufficient, there is nothing good [there] whatsoever”²⁵⁶ (1955, 2)

²⁵⁶ မေး။ ။ သုဒ္ဓါဝါသ ဗြဟ္မာ ဖြစ်ရ ရင် ကောင်းမည် မဟုတ်ပါလားဘုရား။

ဖြေ။ ။ ဆရာတော်ကြီးသည် ကုလားထိုင်ပေါ်တွင် ခေါင်းချနေတော်မူရာမှ ပြင်၍ခေါင်းထောင်တော် မှ ပြီး ။ အင်း-သုဒ္ဓါဝါသ ဗြဟ္မာ ဖြစ်ရ တာ ကောင်းသင့်သလောက်တွေ ကောင်းတယ်ဆိုရမှာပေါ့။ သို့ပေ မဲ့ ဒီကောင်းတာဟာ အသိ မစုံသေး သူအတွက် ကောင်းတာဘဲ၊ အသိ စုံ သူအတွက်ကား ဘာမျှကောင်းတာမရှိတော့ဘူး (1955, 2).

The editorial decision to narrate the Mingun Jetavana’s physical response to this question, the lowering and raising of his head, seems to indicate that he intuitively where this line of questioning is leading, but is compelled to answer truthfully, at least as far as he understands the situation. One whose “knowledge is sufficient,” that is, who is perfect in knowledge, is an *arahant*, having no need to be reborn in the Brahma Realm to complete one’s training. For the Brahma Realm is only a kind of intermediary stage before becoming an *arahant*, as anyone who resides there is still subject to the cycle of *samsāra*, even though they are guaranteed to escape it while there. Here the Mingun Jetavana is not explicitly stating that he is perfect in knowledge, only confirming his view that one *who is* would not desire to be reborn in the Brahma Realm. The confirmation of his view is a necessary premise to setup the next series of questions, for at this juncture, the reader can only be certain that the Mingun Jetavana believes he is at least an *anāgāmin*. In a move to eliminate all ambiguity and alternative interpretations while still maintaining the letter of the eighth *pācittiya* that prohibits openly declaring one’s attainments to someone not ordained, Medhavi proceeds to ask:

Question: “Sayadaw, where do you wish to be in your next life, Pheya?”

Answer: “I do not wish to be anywhere in [my next] life”

Question: “Can it be presumed that you will not have [another] life after all, Pheya?”

Answer: “One might take it [as such].”²⁵⁷ (1955, 2)

The first critical aspect of these final questions is the word choice of the interviewer. In the last query, he asks the Mingun Jetavana whether it can be “presumed” that he will not be reborn. The Burmese word here, *yū cha* (ယူဆ) can also be taken as “deduction” (MAA, s.v. ယူဆ), which is

²⁵⁷ မေး။ ။ ဆရာတော် နောက်ထပ် ဘယ်ဘဝမှာ ဖြစ်လိုပါသလဲဘုရား။

ဖြေ။ ။ ဘယ်ဘဝမှာမှမဖြစ်လိုဘူး။

မေး။ ။ ဘဝမရှိတော့ဟု ယူဆပြီး ဖြစ်ပါသလားဘုရား။

ဖြေ။ ။ ယူတယ် (1955, 2).

exactly what has occurred: the interviewer has established through his line of inquiry a set of premises that result in an inference of the Mingun Jetavana's status by recourse to accepted soteriological principles, thereby preempting the need for the Mingun Jetavana to explicitly declare his status while allowing him to logically allude to it indirectly through the gradual elimination of possible alternatives. It is a kind of Socratic method drawing out underlying presuppositions, yet instead of reducing the Mingun Jetavana's statement to absurdity, these questions accomplish the opposite, beatifying him in the mind of the *Burma Times*'s readership and providing a public avenue to his immanent states. Note also the ambiguity in the final reply of the Mingun Jetavana, that the presumption of the interviewer might or might not "be taken" as such; the terseness of the answer suggests that there are two possible interpretations, either that the Mingun Jetavana will not be reborn, or that he could sympathetically understand why some might assume as much, without consenting himself. The result is that the Mingun Jetavana distances himself from an affirmative answer, freeing him from any responsibility to what the audience might believe, or rather, chooses to believe, while also leaving room for their consent. He is in essence leaving it up to them, thus escaping any sanction or censure that might result in his breaching of the *pācittiya* offence on declaring one's attainments to non-monastics, even if such attainments are grounded in reality.

Hence in the climax of this series of questions, and really the climax of the special edition itself, the Mingun Jetavana leaves open the possibility that he is not just a *sotāpanna* or *anāgāmin*, but an *arahant*—a fully enlightened being in the flesh. It can be assumed that he has accomplished every religious goal he set out to do in this very life, without the need for another rebirth to complete his spiritual development. Given the comment by Pranke at the end of last chapter, that "there is no recorded instance where any of the[se meditation masters] declared

themselves to be enlightened” (Pranke 2010, 463), this episode is extraordinary, as the Mingun Jetavana invites his disciples and the readership of the *Burma Times*, at least indirectly, to celebrate his enlightened status.²⁵⁸ While Pranke is technically still correct in his claim (since the Mingun Jetavana did not *directly* declare anything in the above conversation), even leaving open the possibility is a bold and brazen act that could invite censure, even from among his close disciples. Yet it seems that at the end of his life, untethered to a conventional lineage and with an alternate base of authority and legitimation grounded in his *vipassanā* practice and preaching, the Mingun Jetavana was not concerned by the consequences of his comments, or whether people would believe or contest them. In this way, the editors of the *Burma Times* use this special edition to extend an invitation to the public to participate in, contests, or possibly reproduce the narratives of enlightenment surrounding the Mingun Jetavana, regardless of their validity.

Conclusion

What this episode in the special edition suggests is that if the composition of commentary is indeed a form of practice for the Mingun Jetavana, as the discussion on the Peṭ-a and the Mil-a has shown, then the writing of commentary is also an essential component of the public performance of enlightenment in which the Mingun Jetavana and his followers were engaged.

²⁵⁸ I emphasize the public nature of this episode because the Mingun Jetavana appears to have privately told his disciple, Tikkhācāra, of his belief in his own personal attainments, which is not a transgression of the eighth *pācittiya*, since the latter is fully ordained. In his biography of the Mingun Jetavana, Tikkhācāra notes that the Mingun Jetavana “had practiced *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation intensively for three consecutive years from the age of 37 until he accomplished his purpose at the age of 40. In this regard, Sayādawji himself once said to me that he was satisfied with his spiritual achievement at the age of 40” ([1957] 2014, 24). This belief might have been common knowledge, and the fact that the episode between his interviewer and the Mingun Jetavana was recorded in the newspaper suggests that the Mingun Jetavana was aware of its public nature, possibly by the presence of a reporter or journalist from the *Burma Times*.

Recall, for example, that it is precisely the controversy around the Mil-a and its derivative text, the *Kathina-vinicchaya*, that leads to the oblique affirmation of the Mingun Jetavana’s belief in his own *arahant* status. Indeed, the implied conclusion of this series of questions—prompted by the controversy over the commentary—is that even though the Mil-a appears unorthodox or contentious, this view is only subscribed to by those of little knowledge, like the white hares at the edge of the unfathomable ocean; rather, because the Mingun Jetavana is said to have achieved the highest state possible in Theravada Buddhism, he is eminently competent to comment on such a text, while his views, however controversial they appear, should at least be accepted on faith. The extended argument here is that a monk who has merely mastered Pali and memorised the scriptures is not capable of writing an *aṭṭhakathā* on an enigmatic text like the Mil—only an *arahant* can do so.

I have tried to analyse in this chapter some of the narratives of enlightenment that surrounded the Mingun Jetavana and have shaped his legacy since his passing in 1955. My aim was to explore the ways such narratives were deployed to support the claims of *arahantship* made on behalf of and obliquely by the Mingun Jetavana, without passing judgement on their veracity. The concept of “enlightenment” is here taken to be an immanently constructed category in need of social capital and cultural legitimacy to fuel its ascent, assent, and circulation in the public sphere. While circulating in the public sphere, such narratives and the claims they were designed to support invoke a cacophony of contrapuntal voices probing, affirming, reorienting, and denying the Mingun Jetavana’s rarified status before and after his death. These voices include those curating the legacy of the Mingun Jetavana, but also those who read or opposed his texts, practiced or ridiculed his technique, and even the newspaper editors who decided to print his obituary and portray him as “a great *arahant*,” if only for the reason of selling more papers.

This chapter has thus tried to present the identity of “the Mingun Jetavana” as a cultivated and contested site of monastic and even political semiotics, a persona of social production that requires rhetorical strategies to create and constantly reaffirm. His case is instructive because such rhetoric of enlightenment relies on pre-existing motifs but also innovates on them in the process. One of the pre-existing motifs is that the writing of religious commentary is not just a scholastic exercise, but a form of practice within an overarching ascetic lifestyle. The distinct character of the rhetoric surrounding the life of the Mingun Jetavana, however, is that because he writes the first *aṭṭhakathā* in perhaps a millennium, the composition of his Mil-a is combined with his attainments in meditation to legitimise his status as one of the living *arahants* of the twentieth century. In fact, it might be more than a coincidence that these first new *aṭṭhakathās* were written not long after claims about enlightened status in Burma began to emerge, including those in the lineage of the Mingun Jetavana. In the next chapter, this lineage will be investigated to elucidate not only the importance of textual learning, but the role of the *abhiññās* in the current age of *sāsana* decline.

6 Lineal Anecdotes of the *Abhiññās* in an Age of *Sāsana* Decline

Introduction

The concept of the “living *arahant*” in the twentieth century is not fundamentally a question of this or that individual’s spiritual status. Instead, the existence or non-existence of *arahants* strikes at the very heart of what is and is not possible in terms of Theravada soteriology in twentieth-century Burma, an era considered to be an advanced age of *sāsana* decline where the efficacy of the Buddha’s emancipatory promise has severely waned. Questions of soteriology, despite the convoluted theory and obscure texts involved, are not limited to the literary or monastic realms, but have significant social and political impact, shaping the mode of monastic-state relations and underwriting the relationship between the community of monks and its lay supporters. A related and equally impactful question to that of the living *arahant* is the contemporary possibility of unlocking the *abhiññās*, higher forms of knowledge accessed only through intense *samatha* meditation and the *jhānic* states, which bring the practitioner transcendental powers to collapse conventionally unfathomable stretches of time, space, and *saṃsāra*. Sometimes derided by Buddhist modernists in Asia, North America, and Europe as unscientific signs of superstitious irrationalism, the *abhiññās* are yet another site of contestation and negotiation for the Mingun Jetavana and his contemporaries in the middle of the twentieth century. The purpose of this chapter is not to answer whether the *abhiññās* are indeed possible or not, but to initiate a shift of focus to the construction of discourses around the *abhiññās*, to unearth the active role such discourses play in the lineage of the Mingun Jetavana, and to explore how they shape public perception of monks said to be in possession of them. Such a shift will

allow us to identify the function the *abhiññās* serve in the Mil-a and the Mingun Jetavana's promotion of full female ordination in the next two chapters, because without first appreciating how the *abhiññās* operate in the Mingun Jetavana's lineage and in broader, society-wide discourses about *sāsana* decline, we will not have the tools necessary to understand his broader project and uncover the reasons why his commentary was deemed so threatening to the monastic elite and independent administration.

A second task this chapter does not set for itself is to answer whether the Mingun Jetavana himself is said to have unlocked and exercised the *abhiññās*. While Ei Ei Lwin reports, following a Burmese biography of living *arahants*,²⁵⁹ that it is rumored the Mingun Jetavana “attained the way of mental absorption” (Ei Ei Lwin 2011, 76), meaning the *jhānas* prerequisite to unlocking the *abhiññās*, there are no explicit or unambiguous indications by his supporters or in the biographies which I consulted that he was linked to the *abhiññās*. Yet what we do find is that the presence and play of the *abhiññās* as archetypal tropes were active in his lineage before and after the Mingun Jetavana, especially in the stories surrounding the Thilone introduced in the last chapter and in the case of Ashin Paññāsāra (အရှင်ပညာသာရ Arhan paññāsāra, 1923-1987; hereafter Pannasara). Common to these two monastic figures is a background in extensive scriptural learning (P. *pariyatti*) before a turn towards contemplative practice (P. *paṭipatti*). In both cases, the distinction between *pariyatti* and *paṭipatti* is reconciled and resolved in part by the display, presence, or potential of the *abhiññās*, which serve as external signifiers of one's soteriological attainments (P. *paṭivedhas*). In this sense, the concept of the lineage becomes a powerful tool of analysis, enabling us to approach the Mil-a through a broader historical

²⁵⁹ Ei Ei Lwin cites as her source here the *Biography of Arahats* by one U Sāsanavisuddhi.

perspective and with a fuller network of actors with the Mingun Jetavana at its centre. This network brings together many threads coursing through the dissertation, such as the dynamic between *vipassanā* meditation, the *abhiññās*, and mass-recitation councils meant to stave off or slow down the decay of the Buddha's teachings.

Given my use of the concept of the lineage as an analytical tool, the chapter begins with a section on this concept in Burma, with special emphasis on the practice lineage of the Mingun Jetavana. I draw from the Mingun Jetavana's practice lineage two examples, the Thilone introduced in Chapter Four, and Pannasara, active during the late-eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries respectively. In two eponymous sections dedicated to each of these figures, anecdotes of the *abhiññās* in the lives of the Thilone and Pannasara are discussed in relation to what these stories inform us about broader anxieties around the state of the *sāsana*, while in the fourth section, "Lineal Anecdotes of *Abhiññās*," I explain how episodes involving the first *abhiññā*, the various supernormal powers (P. *iddhividha*), function as a sort of emblem or symbol of the personal accomplishments of both the Thilone and Pannasara in their practice of meditation. I offer the caveat that there is no need to accept the veracity of such anecdotes while emphasizing that their patent circulation over the generations is itself a social fact, revealing how their devotees and segments of wider society evaluated the vitality of Theravada Buddhism through the prism of these two figures and the presence or absence of the *abhiññās*.

In the section titled "Lineage of the *Aṭṭhakathā Ācariyas*," I put forth that the Mingun Jetavana and his commentary can be productively viewed as belonging to the line of those who composed the classical *aṭṭhakathās*, demonstrating that anecdotes of the *abhiññās* like those surrounding the Thilone and Pannasara played a similar role in the institutionalization of the

Tipiṭaka as a whole. Appearing in the *nidānas* (“introductions”) of several *aṭṭhakathās*, I highlight the account of Ānanda and his participation in the First Council, demonstrating the long-term dynamic between the Tipiṭaka and the *abhiññās* at the heart of the Pali commentarial project. Treatments of Ānanda’s story also reveal the ways the *abhiññās* were meant to mediate or epitomize anxieties about the decline of the *sāsana*, anxieties which I analyze in the penultimate section, where I briefly examine the diversity of discourses of *sāsana* decline in premodern, early modern and twentieth-century Burma. These discourses, which reveal that the “*sāsana*” is a living, open, and kinetic concept constantly being reinterpreted and repurposed in the service of different reform movements, brings into relief the ethos in which the Mingun Jetavana was writing and enables us to appreciate why he initiated his *Mil-a* with a discussion on the *abhiññās* and their accessibility in the mid-twentieth century. In my last section, I analyze this discussion of the *abhiññās* in the first chapter of the Mingun Jetavana’s commentary, presenting two apparently divergent schemes of *sāsana* history found in the *Mil-a*, which in comparison demonstrate what was at stake for him in the twentieth-century debates on *sāsana* decline. The stakes, in fact, were nothing short of the epistemic basis of the Pali commentarial project he was engaged in, because for the Mingun Jetavana, the *abhiññās* are at the heart of his *aṭṭhakathā*, functioning as the theory of knowledge for his commentary and his mission to reinstate the higher ordination of women in Burma.

6.1 Lineages of the Mingun Jetavana

The concept of lineage is both fundamental and in flux in the Burmese context. Most monastics over the twentieth century did not have a single line of teaching or training but existed in multiple formal and informal lineages overlapping with one another in complimentary but also contradictory ways. Formal lineages were cemented through the ceremony of higher ordination (*P. upasampadā*) and bound by the jurisdiction of the sacred place where this ordination took place (*P. sīmā*). Yet monks with means and the appropriate social networks could leave these “jurisdictions” and continue their monastic education in multiple learning institutions with varying affiliations, thereby forging teacher-student relationships that can be as strong as or stronger than the bonds wrought through *upasampadā*. Houtman calls the relationships built through textual learning and educational institutions the “conventional lineages [that] tend to document the links between a monk and his teachers during his early career” (Houtman 1990b, 91). There is yet another form of lineage, one that may or may not map onto the previous two: the “practice lineage” (ပဋိပတ္တိအစဉ်အဆက် *paṭipatti acañ achak*) (Houtman 1997, 322). This practice lineage is in many ways informal but like conventional lineages is built through the teacher-student relationship. However, in this case, the teacher is not purveying scriptural knowledge alone, but techniques of meditation and regimes of practice. Such lineages are mostly informal because “the criteria for succession and lineage, not being based on ordination, has never been clearly formulated” (Houtman 1990b, 92), though this situation is changing as certain monasteries emphasizing meditation are starting to introduce *upasampadā* ceremonies into their set of rituals.²⁶⁰ At one such monastery in the lineage of the Mingun Jetavana in Thaton, which

²⁶⁰ See Houtman’s thesis, Chapter Four, for a detailed discussion on the differences between ordination ceremonies based in meditation lineages and those of a more conventional nature. In reviewing his findings, Houtman explains that “some marked differences were noted between novitiation as performed in the meditation centre as compared to

doubles as a monastery and meditation centre for lay practitioners, the *sīmā* is esteemed as a place for monastics to practice meditation—to connect with the residual *dhātu* (“element”) of the technique’s progenitor as *sīmās*-cum-relics, or relics of practice.

Yet this situation can lead to conflict between the formal lineages based on *upasampadā* and practice lineages based on meditation methods. For example, the Mingun Jetavana was initially ordained as part of the Shwegyin sect (ရွှေကျင်ဂိုဏ်း: *rhve kyañ guñh*), which was established by the First Shwegyin introduced in Chapter Four under the auspices of King Mindon. As the Mingun Jetavana’s commitment to *vipassanā* meditation increased and he would increasingly isolate himself to practice his technique and compose commentary, the Mingun Jetavana “humbly requested the senior monks of the order to exempt him as a yogi from attending to the annual ceremony of *vinaya* recitation in Thaton, held every year as required by [the] Shwe-jin Order” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 66). It appears that this request, made sometime in the 1920s or 1930s, was not welcomed by the Shwegyin leadership, especially because “a plan to consecrate a *sīmā* hall in Jetavan Monastery was rejected (by the Shwejin Order) by denouncing it as an improper act” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 67).²⁶¹

outside. In particular, there was a self-conscious redefinition of many Buddhist concepts such as ‘merit’ and ‘charity’, with an overall simplification of the ceremony without royal regalia, a master of ceremonies and its Brahmanic symbolism, supernatural invocations, and music; a much shorter ritual resulted which invoked fundamental meanings in the Scriptures for its existence where the non-meditator’s novitiation invoked inherited custom” (Houtman 1990b, 239).

²⁶¹ Tikkhacara also mentions that the Mingun Jetavana was embroiled in a controversy over a *kathina* ceremony conducted by a one Ashin Paññāsāmi, who presided over a forest monastery named Abhayagiri (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 67). The biographer does not mention the nature of this dispute and what role the Mingun Jetavana played therein, only the fact that such disputes distracted the Mingun Jetavana from focusing on meditation. This claim, however, does not quite align with what we know of the repertoire of the Mingun Jetavana, who wrote extensively on issues of *kathina* in several publications, perhaps in response to this controversy within the Shwegyin.

Controversies over the consecration of *sīmās* are replete throughout Burmese history,²⁶² with entire lineages being abolished when a *sīmā* has been deemed improper, even if the offending act occurred centuries before.²⁶³ It is possible that the ordination hall established by the Mingun Jetavana in this dispute with the Shwegyin is the same as that considered ideal for the practice of meditation today, hence the rejection by the Shwegyin leadership ran directly counter of the goals of the monastery-cum-meditation centre itself.²⁶⁴ As a result,

these conditions forced [the Mingun Jetavana] to quit [the] Shwe-jin Order and live an independent life in solitude. So, Min-gone Jetavan Sayādawji spent the rest of his life enjoying the independent and easy-going lifestyle (*appa-kicca, sallahuka*) most suitable to a monk, by devoting all his time and energy to the practice without engaging in any particular religious order and without bothering about anything but practice. (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 67)

It is not clear when exactly this break with the Shwegyin sect occurred, and only the account of the Mingun Jetavana's supporters was relayed above, but the events probably transpired in the middle of the Mingun Jetavana's teaching career, before his *satipaṭṭhāna* method was widely received and celebrated. The break between a well-known meditation monk like the Mingun Jetavana and the Shwegyin leadership might have been one reason the Shwegyin sect did not appear to embrace *vipassanā* practice until 1957 in their formal meetings, as reported by Than Tun in Chapter Four, particularly because such monks are difficult for any hierarchy to control,

²⁶² See, for example, an entire anthology dedicated to the subject edited by Jason Carbine and Erik W. Davis (2022)

²⁶³ See for example Michael Aung-Thwin (1979) on King Dhammaceti's reordination campaign in fifteenth-century Pegu in Lower Burma, who decided, ostensibly on textual grounds but partly for political reasons, that major Burmese *sīmā* lineages were invalid. As a result, King Dhammaceti sent monks to Sri Lanka to reestablish a valid lineage and forced Burmese monks to re-ordain in this lineage once his emissaries returned. For a discussion on such reordination campaigns in Southeast Asia more generally during this period, see Tilman Frasch (Frasch 2014).

²⁶⁴ There are at least three ordination halls associated with the Mingun Jetavana, one in Thaton, one in Mingun, and one in Yangon, though he never personally visited the meditation centre in Yangon set up in his name. Since the ordination hall in Thaton is the only one specifically linked to practice and located in a meditation centre, my educated guess is that the controversial *sīmā* was that located in Thaton, but more research is needed to be sure, perhaps within the internal records and correspondence of the Shwegyin sect itself.

especially if they attempt to establish their own *sīmā* halls and formal lineages through higher ordination. There may be another, less tangible reason for the split between the Mingun Jetavana and the Shwegyin, however, a reason concerning the former's view on the soteriological potential of *vipassanā* practice.

According to Tikkhacara, in the annual *vinaya* recitation ceremony slated for Thaton mentioned above, the Mingun Jetavana was invited to give a *dhamma* talk to the monks assembled there, as Thaton was a site of one of his meditation monasteries and centres for lay practice (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 66). However, before the event, the Mingun Jetavana's opportunity to preach was revoked and he was replaced by a monk who Tikkhacara derides as "a bold, dynamic, and shamelessly outspoken preacher" (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 66). Once on the "lecture throne," this individual, who is not named in the biography, began to hurl "sarcastic comments non-stop like a machine-gun" at the Mingun Jetavana, claiming that he had been

told that many dhamma-seekers here in Thaton have even attained *magga-phala* enlightenments, one stage after another consecutively (by noting such physical actions as bending or stretching and so on). Everybody, even a animal, knows bending and stretching; a dog knows it; a pig knows it; this is the knowledge all dogs and pigs have got in common. (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 66–67)

This reference is not only to the *satipaṭṭhāna* method of the Mingun Jetavana and his technique of noting the four bodily postures, but to his purported attainments and those promised to his practitioners, as the *magga-phala*, or "fruit of the path," refers to the highest state one can hope to achieve by practicing the Mingun Jetavana's sixteen-stage *vipassanā* technique. At issue here, as Jordt explains, is that "[u]nlike other sects within the sangha, such as the Thudhamma sect, the Shwegyin sect is distinguished by its emphasis on hierarchy rather than loose autonomy for its member groupings" (Jordt 2007, 51). The friction between the Mingun Jetavana and the

Shwegyin, then, might have been the former’s claim—or claims made on his behalf—that his students and he were achieving rarefied soteriological states, claims made without the sanctioning of the Shwegyin hierarchy. Another aspect of this controversy is the fact that monastics and lay practitioners were sharing the same space, such as at the monastery-cum-meditation centre in Thaton. Indeed, Jordt points out that the Mingun Jetavana’s student, the Mahasi, had a similar confrontation with the Shwegyin in later decades over his own centre in Yangon, a confrontation fuelled, “principally, [by] the suitability of laity and monks living in close proximity” (Jordt 2007, 43). If we expand this notion of “space” to include both the actual place of meditation and the soteriological potential of those pursuing the same course of practice, we can appreciate how the Mingun Jetavana’s promise of *magga-phala* to those practicing under him might have caused concern among the Shwegyin elite, since it was made to both monastics and the laity. Like the Mingun Jetavana, the Mahasi too resigned from the Shwegyin, the “final break with the Shwegyin [having] occurred following a miraculous claim made by a yogi who had practiced for two months at [the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha]. The young and uneducated peasant woman from the countryside reportedly became the ‘channel’ through which a devā (celestial being) began to speak in Pāli, in a high-pitched and wavering voice” (Jordt 2007, 50).²⁶⁵ The issue, according to Jordt, was not so much the veracity of the claims surrounding the “young and uneducated peasant women,” so much as the general unorthodox nature of these events (Jordt 2007, 51). In the case of the Mingun Jetavana, his course of practice was also seen as unorthodox by segments of the Shwegyin hierarchy, as merely “the knowledge all dogs and

²⁶⁵ Jordt adds, however, that according to some of her informants, the “real issue” was one over monastic property, with the Shwegyin sect wanting to wrest control over the Mahasi Sasana Yeiktha from the lay organization that oversaw the centre’s operations (Jordt 2007, 51).

pigs have got in common” masquerading as *buddha-vacana*. This unorthodox nature of his technique was especially prevalent in the first few decades of the twentieth century when the split between the Mingun Jetavana and his sect took place. As the account of this split between the Mingun Jetavana and the Shwegyin reveal, lineages based on *upasampadā* do not always align with lineages based on practice, and indeed, the two can often times be in direct confrontation.

6.2 Thilone and the First *Abhiññā*

Establishing the historical origins of one’s formal lineage is paramount in proving the purity of one’s *upasampadā* in Theravada Buddhism; it is also necessary for a practice lineage to lend a degree of legitimacy to the method being taught, especially one seen as unorthodox as the Mingun Jetavana’s noting technique ridiculed above. Foremost in the Mingun Jetavana’s practice lineage is thus the Thilone, who is traced to the Mingun Jetavana through the Aletawya introduced in Chapter Four.²⁶⁶ Active in the late Konbaung period (1752-1885) and once “the *Rajaguru* (Royal Teacher) of Tharrawaddy Min (1837-1846), the fourth last king of Burma” (Maung Maung 1980, 114),²⁶⁷ the Thilone transformed himself into a practitioner of meditation

²⁶⁶ The Thiloe is also an important figure in the Shwegyin sect, for it is said that he also taught the First Shwegyin meditation (Tin Tin Nyo 2010, 103–4). Given the importance of the Thilone in the history of Konbaung period, it is possible that many meditation teachers attempt to trace themselves to him and his teachings, granting their techniques more historical legitimacy and acceptability in the process. For instance, the Thilone is also a foundational figure in the lineage of the Hgnetwin introduced in Chapter Four (Houtman 1990b, 295), for the Dwaya sect (ဒွယာဂိုဏ်း *dvāra guinh*) (Mendelson 1975, 103), and the Veluvan sect (ဝေလုဝန်ဂိုဏ်း *velu van guinh*) (Mendelson 1975, 364), the so-called “Mindon sects” that arose in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

²⁶⁷ About the Thilone, Ko Ko Naing writes that King Mindon regarded him as “an exemplary monk who studied the scriptures (*pariyatti*) and practiced meditation (*patipatti*), and [the king] desired to invite him to the royal capital to promote Sasana. However, as [the Thilone] refused to move to the royal capital, King Mindon constructed a monastery named Yadanabonsan in the [Thilone village] for him” (Ko Ko Naing 2010, 137–38). Instead, King Mindon “invited U Nanda, who was a pupil of [the Thilone] and who later became known as the Shankalekyun

after mastering scriptural study and learning, a pattern often found in different accounts of the Mingun Jetavana’s *vipassanā* lineage. It is said in the Thilone’s biography that the Kingtawya, who was seen as an ascetic adept self-consciously outside the royal court, “used to urge [the Thilone] to meditate [by saying] ‘Brother [Thilone], don’t satisfy yourself just as the King’s monk. I don’t dare to die with just [being] skillful in studying, learning and teaching scriptures (*ganthadhura*)’” (Thi trans. Hla Myat Thu 2013, 13). Using mostly the lineage histories of the Shwegyin in compiling his biography on the Thilone,²⁶⁸ Htay Hlaing reports that these two monks then held “discuss[ions] on path-fruition (*magga-phala*), *Nibbāna*, how to obtain to supernormal knowledges (*abhiññā*), how to know and practice in the field of theory and practice of psychic powers” (Thi trans. Hla Myat Thu 2013, 13). This *magga-phala*, as mentioned above, is also the final goal prescribed by the Mingun Jetavana in his sixteen-stage *vipassanā* method, but what is unique here (at least from the perspective of modern, reform *vipassanā*) is the pairing of this goal with the *abhiññās*, usually considered as the product of *samatha* meditation. Aside from his reliance on the Vism, and the claims by the founder of the Shwegyin sect that he learned mindfulness relating to the 32 parts of the body (*P. dvattimsa kāya-gata-sati-kammaṭṭhānaṃ*) from the Thilone (Tin Tin Nyo 2010, 103–4), the exact nature of the Thilone’s

Sayadaw,” and on June 14th, 1855, the Thilone’s pupil took up residence in a specially built monastery in Mandalay (Ko Ko Naing 2010, 138).

²⁶⁸ The primary source used by Htay Hlaing appears to be the *Rhve kyaṇ nikāya sāsanaṃ waṇ* (ရွှေကျင်နကာရသာသနာဝင် *The Sāsana Lineage of the Shwegyin*), which Ko Ko Naing lists as authored by an “Ashin Pandita” in 1963 and published by the “Buddha Sasana Council,” likely the Buddha *sāsanaṃ nuggaha* aphvai (ဗုဒ္ဓသာသနာနုဂ္ဂဟအဖွဲ့. Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Association) mentioned below (Ko Ko Naing 2010, 1963). Given the fact that the date of this text is after that of Htay Hlaing’s biography, it is possible that Ko Ko Naing is referring to a reprint. Than Thun is also credited with a *Rhve kyaṇ nikāya sāsanaṃ waṇ*, which was never published and dated to 1980 (Ko Ko Naing 2010, xii).

meditation program is unknown,²⁶⁹ but Htay Hlaing claims that “[w]hile [the Thilone] was staying in the forest, and being the object of refuge and honoured by kings and queens, yet he made effort to be skillful in *Jhāna*” (Thi trans. Hla Myat Thu 2013, 12). The *jhānas*, or the states of total absorption, are the keys to accessing the *abhiññās*, the “psychic powers” discussed by the Thilone and the Kingtawya above. Hiroko Kawanami, in a discussion about the charisma and influence of monastics like the Thilone who come to be considered *arahants* or on the verge of becoming so,²⁷⁰ explains that “many of the stories surrounding an *arahant* or narrated by earnest devotees focus on his miraculous powers and supra-human feats casting light on his extraordinary abilities” (Kawanami 2009, 224). While it is possible that the status of the Thilone as a living *arahant* was an interpolation well after his passing, when the concept was more widely accepted, the biography of the Thilone is dominated by his miraculous feats “narrated by earnest devotees,” demonstrating the crucial role of the *abhiññās* in curating the legacy of this figure.

Though these stories dominate much of the Thilone’s biography, only one will be related here. Htay Hlaing recounts how, on a summer evening, the Thilone’s attendant, Thutaw, left the elderly monk and decided “to take a bath in a lake far from the monastery and told the sayadaw.

²⁶⁹ Part of the problem here is the fact that the Thilone, given his historical importance in the Konbaung period and his integral role at the base of several practice lineages, has become a site of sectarian interpolation, meaning it is difficult to disentangle how much “technique” is projected onto this figure, and how much represents his own teaching program. According to Houtman, the Thilone is “known to have authored 64 treatises” in which he often emphasized meditation (Houtman 1990b, 294). There is at least one meditation text attributed to the Thilone, titled *Bhāvanā-naya dīpanī* (*Manual on the Method of [Mental] Development*), but Houtman quotes Htay Hlaing as explaining that the Thilone “has not written treatises about his own methods of meditation, but this must be interpreted as the result of the fact that in that age there were few people who would follow” (Houtman 1997, 295).

²⁷⁰ The soteriological status of the Thilone changes according to different lineage histories. In the Mahasi’s account, who is in the practice lineage of the Mingun Jetavana, the Thilone was considered a *anāgāmin* (“once-returner”), the penultimate stage in Theravada soteriology, while in the Shwegyin sect, it is often hinted that he was indeed an *arahant* (Houtman 1997, 295).

The moon was very bright and beautiful” (Thi trans. Hla Myat Thu 2013, 20). After travelling a long distance, and with the lake in sight, “Thutaw saw someone was bathing. When reaching nearby, to his surprise he saw that person was [the Thilone]. He thought, how did the old and feeble sayadaw get to this far place at night time, how did he come and reach there [so] quickly?” (Thi trans. Hla Myat Thu 2013, 20). Unable to make sense of what he had seen, Thutaw asked how the elderly Thilone was able to reach the lake before him without aid, to which the Thilone replied: “‘Thutaw, when I am still alive, don’t tell anyone about this matter.’ The sayadaw asked him to shut his mouth. Then he went back to his monastery by flying through the sky. The personal attendant Thutaw only told other people about this incident when sayadaw had passed away” (Thi trans. Hla Myat Thu 2013, 21). This anecdote testifies to the sorts of stories that surround charismatic monks mentioned by Kawanami above, and what we see here is an example of the most basic and preliminary *abhiññā*, known in Pali as “*iddhividhāñāṇa*,” or “the various supernormal powers,” which includes the ability to levitate, walk through walls, be in two places at once, and general mastery over matter.

In reference to a separate anecdote concerning *iddhividhāñāṇa*, the translator of Htay Hlaing’s biography, Hla Myat Thu, adds a remarkable clarificatory note of his own: “[p]eople who have psychic power and achieved enlightenment really exist in this world at that time. That shows the teachings of the Buddha is truly real and enlightenment could be achieved even at the present time” (Thi trans. Hla Myat Thu 2013, 17–18). What is revealing about this quote is that Hla Myat Thu, writing in 2013, links the presence of the *abhiññās* to the vitality of the *sāsana* as a whole, with the former acting as a synecdoche for the latter. In the same apologetic tone, Htay Hlaing (or his Shwegyin source) claims that “[w]hen asked by people, whether could *jhāna* or supernormal knowledges (*abhiññā*) still be obtained nowadays, [the Thilone] did not promote his

achievement. For half a life, he was only strong in theory, and weak at practice. He felt ashamed to speak out of his own achievement” (Thi trans. Hla Myat Thu 2013, 20). Following this same spirit of discretion in another translator’s note, Hla Myat Thu made sure to qualify his statement later on with a citation from the *Rhve kyaṇṇ nikāya sāsanaṇ waṇ* (ရွှေကျင်နကာရသာသနာဝင် *The Sāsana Lineage of the Shwegyin*), cautioning that “we dare not say that he has not attained all six higher [forms of] knowledges including the cessation of all defilement (*āsavakkhaya-abhiñṇā*). The characteristics of noble persons are very subtle and not easy to be detected (even to those who lived near them)” (Thi trans. Hla Myat Thu 2013, 21). In making this qualification and leaving open the actual attainments of the Thilone, the translator demonstrates the continued anxiety in Burma about the status of charismatic monastics like the Thilone, with the discussion framed in terms of the *abhiñṇās*, the “six higher [forms of] knowledge” referenced in the *Shwegyin nikāya sāsana waṇ*.

6.3 Pannasara and the *Tipiṭakadhara* Exams

Moving from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the second instructive figure in the practice lineage of the Mingun Jetavana is Pannasara, who trained under the Mingun Jetavana late in the latter’s life and was also a kind of “royal” monk for the first parliamentary government, though as we will see, only reluctantly. According to a text compiled by the Mingun Jetavana’s meditation centre in Thaton titled *Maṇḥ kvaṇḥ jetavan paṭipatti sāsanaṇ waṇ* (မင်းကွန်းဇေတဝန်ပဋိပတ္တိသာသနာဝင် *The Mingun Jetavana's Sāsana Practice Lineage*), Pannasara was a gifted monk from the onset, “able to recite the five sacred scriptures of the

Vinaya without [requiring] aid in the Vinaya recitation contest celebrated in the Shwe Hin Tha Forest”²⁷¹ (Pruṃḥ khyui 2005, 252). Yet a career as a scholastic monk was not to be, for

after his success reciting without [requiring] aid the five Vinaya scriptures at the Vinaya recitation examination that was celebrated in the Shwe Hin Tha Forest, [Pannasara] did not desire to continue carrying out the dut[ies] of learning *pariyatti* and instructing [younger monks in the Buddhist scriptures] anymore, he had decided that he would instead strive to continue only [learning] the *dhammas* [teachings] of *paṭipatti vipassanā kammaṭṭhāna* [i.e., *vipassanā* meditation practice].²⁷² (Pruṃḥ khyui 2005, 252)

Such a vocational transition is the same as seen in the life of the Thilone and the Mingun Jetavana, though his turn towards meditation occurred at a much earlier point in the life of Pannasara, who came of age in the late 1930s and early 1940s when the modern, reform movement of *vipassanā* was rapidly gaining strength. After making the resolution above, he went to Thaton to practice diligently under the Mingun Jetavana for two years (Pruṃḥ khyui 2005, 252). Eventually Pannasara went to the city of Bago and intensely trained in meditation, even living in a tent with one other monk (Pruṃḥ khyui 2005, 253). Around this time, the first independent administration of Prime Minister U Nu (ဦးနု: ။h nuḥ, 1907-1995) was preparing for the Sixth Council. For the U Nu administration, it was paramount that this event fit the model of previous councils in South Asia and thus accrue for itself the same kind of legitimacy. To this end, the government even had a cave built with a seating capacity of 10,000, the *Mahāpāsāna Guhā* (“the great stone cave”), to replicate the setting of the First Council on the South Asian subcontinent that occurred soon after the Buddha’s *parinibbāna* (Tinker 1959, 174). The cost of

²⁷¹ ရွှေဟင်္သာတောရတွင်ကျင်းပသည့် ဝိနည်းပြန်ဆိုပွဲ၌ ဝိနည်း ၅-ကျမ်းလုံးကို အထောက်အမ,လွတ် ပြန်ဆိုနိုင်လေသည်။ (Pruṃḥ khyui 2005, 252)

²⁷² ရွှေဟင်္သာတောရတွင် ကျင်းပသော ဝိနည်းစာပြန်ပွဲ၌ ဝိနည်းငါးကျမ်းစလုံးကို အထောက်အမ,လွတ် ဖြေဆိုအောင်မြင်ပြီးနောက်ပရိယတ္တိစာသင်ခြင်း၊ စာချခြင်းကိစ္စကို ဆက်လက်မဆောင်ရွက်လိုတော့ဘဲ ပဋိပတ္တိ ဝိပဿနာကမ္မဋ္ဌာန်း တရားများကိုသာ ဆက်လက်အားထုတ်တော့မည် ဟု ဆုံးဖြတ်ခဲ့လေသည်။ (Pruṃḥ khyui 2005, 252)

constructing this cave, which was finished in just over a year, was estimated to be the equivalent of \$2,000,000 USD (Nyein Chan Maung 2006, 51), not insignificant for a country on the brink of economic collapse at the onset of independence, after a devastating world war fought on its soil, and then embroiled in multiple communist and ethnic insurgencies.²⁷³ Another element of the previous recitation councils that needed to be emulated was the position of the “bearer of the Pali canon” (P. *tipiṭakadhara*), someone who could remember the full textual corpus of the Tipiṭaka and recite it by heart. This task is a daunting feat of memory and mental endurance, since the Tipiṭaka runs to about 38 volumes of 400 pages each, at least in the first printed Burmese-script edition by Hanthawaddy (ဟံသာဝတီ *Haṃsāvati*) Press around 1900 in Mandalay (Myint Myint Oo 2011b, 104). Though the critical role of the *tipiṭakadhara* would eventually be filled by the Mingun Sayadaw (introduced in Chapter One as the lead respondent (P. *vissajjanaka*) in the Sixth Council proceedings), Pannasara was crucial to the success of this project in the early and beleaguered search for a candidate.²⁷⁴

After an initial period when the governing Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL) did not seem concerned with the state of Buddhism in Burma, or rather, was unable to

²⁷³ As Jacques Bertrand, Alexandre Pelletier, and Ardeth Maung Thawngmung explain, “U Nu’s government faced rebellion from all sides in the early days of independence,” in part because of a breakdown of the 1947 Constitution, which fundamentally failed to include the Karen, Karenni, Rakhine, and Mon ethnic groups, and which left the Chin and Kachin without a state (Bertrand, Pelletier, and Thawngmung 2022, 45). With this breakdown of the constitutional process and U Nu’s apparent renegeing on Aung San’s promise to ethnic groups for a federal state (or at least their interpretation of such a promise), these groups took up arms against the newly formed state at the same time that “dissident members of the army and police, and ex-soldiers from the People’s Volunteer Organization [...] launched a rebellion under the banner of the Communist Party of Burma,” further putting pressure on the viability of the nascent state (Bertrand, Pelletier, and Thawngmung 2022, 46).

²⁷⁴ There are multiple accounts of *tipiṭakadhāras* in Burmese history, including one as relatively recent as the 18th century. Lammerts points out that “[a]n inscription marking the *cetiya* in Sagaing where his bones are enshrined refers to” the Taungdwin Sayadaw Khingyi Hpyaw Ñāṇālaṅkāra, who passed away in 1762 according to the *Sāsanālaṅkāra* “as a *sabbatipiṭakadhara*—one who carries with him in memory the entire *tipiṭaka*” (D. Christian Lammerts 2018, 149).

attend to religious matters because of instability caused by communist insurgencies and American-backed Kuomintang forces, the U Nu administration began to promote Buddhism as a tool for state building and electoral success. Ei Ei Lwin explains the situation in more religious terms, claiming that the administration of U Nu wanted “to promote the emergence of a heroic *Sāsanā* personality with the ability to memorize and recite by heart the whole of the *Pāli* Canon, the *Tipitaka*, and to seek out personalities with special intellectual powers to receive the reverence and praise of the devotees” (Ei Ei Lwin 2011, 8). Hence the administration, under the auspices of the para-government Buddha *sāsanā* nuggaha aphvai (ဗုဒ္ဓသာသနာနဂ္ဂဟအဖွဲ့. Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Association, hereafter the BSNA), instituted a series of exams identify a twentieth-century *tipiṭakadhara*, the first lasting thirty-three days (Ei Ei Lwin 2011, 8). The BSNA was made up of government officials, such as the Prime Minister himself and the wealthy merchant Sir U Thwin (ဆာဠီးသွင် Chā Ūḥ svañ, 1878-1966; first seen in the introduction as U Thwin) who would eventually help establish the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha in Yangon.²⁷⁵ The first such exam was held on February 7th 1949 at the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha, with seventeen monastics slated to participate (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 98). Yet only six monastics actually attempted this initial exam (Thet Thet Nyunt 2011, 50), and as it was reported in the *Light of Burma* on March 16th, 1949, “no one from the Buddhist order of the monks passed” (Htar Htar Aye 2008, 124).²⁷⁶ This complete failure caused a sense of panic to strike the BSNA and generated debate in the newspapers in Mandalay and Yangon. Myat Myat Htun reports that

²⁷⁵ In fact, the first chairman of the “Tipiṭakadhara Selection Rule and Regulation Revision Committee” was U Thwin, while the first 46 *tipiṭakadhara* exams were held at the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha up until 1995 (Thet Thet Nyunt 2011, 55).

²⁷⁶ A passing mark of the *tipiṭakadhara* exam does not mean, naturally, that one remembers the entirety of the Tipiṭaka without mistake, for Thet Thet Nyunt clarifies some of the means used to mark both the oral and written portions of the test set out in the first two “Tipiṭakadhara Selection Rule and Regulation Revision Committee

[a]s there was no successful candidate in the first examination, many people including monks and laymen objected [to] this examination. In [the] Ba-mar-Khit [*Times of Burma*] newspaper many writers wrote many articles giving many reasons that in olden times Piṭaka Pāli Texts should be put into memory because they were inscribed only on marble slabs and palm leaves; at present days, as there are many printed Piṭaka Pāli Texts in the forms of book[s], there was no need to commit them into memory. Besides, as there were many other Pariyatti Examinations in both ways of recitation and writing, there was not [a] need to hold [a] Tipiṭakadhara Examination using a great amount of money and materials.²⁷⁷ (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 98–99)

Myat Myat Htun goes on to explain that the test was so intense, its preparation so difficult, the consensus was that it would cause harm to the participants, that “the examination, in deed, was a sort of killer test which [would] hurt and kill Tipiṭakadhara candidates” (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 99). For their part, the BSNA, in a meeting attended by all the members, decided “that if none of [the] candidates passed in the second examination, it would be totally stopped” (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 99).

Enter Pannasara. Given the early promise he had shown as a young monk reciting the texts of the Vinayapiṭaka, one of the three components of the Tipiṭaka, his lay supporter, Ūḥ Pvañ. koñḥ (ဦးပွင့်တောင်း; hereafter Pvañ. koñḥ), suggested to the BSNA that he would request Pannasara to take the exam, telling them:

My monk is one monk who has already endured [the rigours of the Vinayapiṭaka recitation exam]. It is true that [he] certainly memorised without [requiring] aid the five scriptures of the Vinaya. If [I] respectfully encourage this monk, he certainly will offer his cooperation. [As] the foremost of the great persons, [we] need to exhort [this] monk

reports,” showing that there was some discretion on the part of the judges in awarding a passing grade, which was not the same as a flawless performance (Thet Thet Nyunt 2011, 35–45).

²⁷⁷ Indeed, there were many opponents to the spectacle and pagentry of the Sixth Council, especially in terms of the resources spent when the nation’s economy was so dire. Mendelson notes that the “Pyinnyaramikamaha Sayadaw” was particularly opposed, writing that “The Sixth Saṅgāyanā is not a Synod but a mere swindle for political ends. Without as much as informing the people to use the people’s funds while letting them starve, merely to create a good record for themselves and their own personal betterment, is the abuse of the people’s money” (Mendelson 1975, 336).

so that [he will] want to answer [the recitation of] the five Vinaya scriptures.²⁷⁸ (Prumh khyui 2005, 254)

However, because of his earlier determination to eschew the dedicated study of texts in order to focus primarily on *vipassanā* training in the method of the Mingun Jetavana, Pannasara rejected this request (Prumh khyui 2005, 254–55). He even rejected the requests made by U Thwin himself, chairman of the BSNA, and it was not until Pvañ. koñh personally pleaded with him for the sake of the “race of the *sāsana*”²⁷⁹ that Pannasara replied in the affirmative—though he promised not to engage in any further official *pariyatti* activities afterwards (Prumh khyui 2005, 255). Finally, in the second examination at the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha, held over a 26 day period beginning on December 25th, 1949, Pannasara sat the exam with four others (Htar Htar Aye 2008, 124). Myat Myat Htun recounts that “[o]ut of the five candidates, only Pannasara passed the recitation examination of Vinaya Piṭaka five Pāli Texts, containing 2260 pages without any pause and error in daily recitation.²⁸⁰ So he was [granted] the title of Buddhasāsanānuggaha Visiṭṭha Vinayadhara [namely, the Eminent] bearer of the Vinaya Pitaka basket [of the BSNA] without the help of anyone else” (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 99).²⁸¹ While this success represented only one of the three “baskets” that constitutes the Tipiṭaka, it was enough to

²⁷⁸ ကျွန်တော်ပွင်းခံထားတဲ့ ဦးပွင်းတစ်ပါးရှိပါတယ်။ ဝိနည်းငါးကျမ်းကို အထောက်အမ,လွတ် အာဂုံဆောင်ခဲ့တာ အမှန်ဖြစ်ပါတယ်။ အဲဒီ ဦးပွင်းကိုပင့်ပေးဆိုရင် ပင်းပေးပါ့မယ်၊ ခေါင်းဆောင်ပုဂ္ဂိုလ်ကြီးများက ဦးပွင်း ဝိနည်းငါးကျမ်းဖြေဆိုချင်အောင်တိုက်တွန်းဖို့ လိုပါတယ် ဟု. (Prumh khyui 2005, 254)

²⁷⁹ အမျိုးဘာသာသာသနာ (Prumh khyui 2005, 255). This term can be taken simply as “religion” and is also connected with the notion of vernacular language (P. *bhāsā*), but I have chosen to translate it as “race of the *sāsana*” to highlight the idea that the action of Pannasara was meant to benefit not only Theravada Buddhism in the abstract but lend prestige to the nation of Burma and its people, reflecting part of the motivation behind the Sixth Council.

²⁸⁰ In contrast, Thet Thet Nyunt gives the Vinayapiṭaka section of the exam as only containing 1988 pages (Thet Thet Nyunt 2011, 46), compared to the figure of 2260 provided by Myat Myat Htun above.

²⁸¹ Thet Thet Nyunt provides several tables outlining the different titles for the *tipiṭakadhara* exams. The title given to Pannasara above indicates that he achieved a level of distinction, compared to the basic title, which is simple “*buddha-sāsana-vinayadhara*” (Thet Thet Nyunt 2011, 46).

ensure future exams would be held. True to his promise to his lay sponsor, Pannasara does not appear to have sat any further exams, but without him, there would not have been any subsequent exams for the *tipiṭakadhara*, given the early pressure on the BSNA. In this sense, Pannasara was an efficient cause for the Sixth Council itself, with his success used to mollify opposition to this “killer test.”

My reason for relating this history is not just to show the connection between the Sixth Council project and the Mingun Jetavana’s practice lineage, but because a narrative developed around Pannasara after his completion of the exam that includes instances of the first *abhiññā*, *iddhividhāñāna*. An anecdote still circulating in the practice communities of the Mingun Jetavana describes how the Pannasara, who was very strict in his alms-collection routine, would be found visiting a given home in Yangon where he was invited for lunch, but was seen simultaneously at a different place, also taking lunch. This feat was said by his lay devotees to have happened multiple times and is an example of *iddhividhāñāna*, the same *abhiññā* supposedly demonstrated by the Thilone in the story of him flying above. As the first *abhiññā*, it is also the easiest to obtain, and perhaps the least problematic to reveal in public, at least indirectly. The circulation of this narrative about Pannasara was probably the result of an attempt by his devotees to explain his amazing feat of memory and to confirm his soteriological attainments wrought through his dedication to meditation practice, thereby elevating his status and affirming the vitality of the Buddha’s *sāsana* in the middle of the twentieth century. This fame, however, seems to have interfered with his vow to focus solely on *vipassanā* training. In 1964, Pannasara gave his lay donors the following ultimatum:

Great male and female donors, so as to repay [my] gratitude, I want to strive in order to complete the duty of a monk. If in this case I am going to continue to strive in this monastery, I desire it be permitted [that I] not meet [with] monastery donors along with [their] families and other male and female donors. After I will be given meals in up to ten

houses in the [nearby] village [...], [I will] finish taking alms. [Then] [...] the gate [of this monastery] will be closed permanently. [...] If you do not agree, I will no longer live at this monastery and will go to the forest permanently.²⁸² (Prumḥ khyui 2005, 260)

It is said that after that time, this monastery was completely closed, and indeed, Pannasara appeared not to travel for alms after 1975, only accepting lunch at his gate (Prumḥ khyui 2005, 261). These reclusive tendencies might have also fueled the spread of the anecdote about Pannasara's possession of *iddhividhāñāṇa*, adding to his reputation for asceticism and austere practice.

6.4 Lineal Anecdotes of *Abhiññās*

One reaction to the kinds of anecdotal narratives attributed to the Thilone and Pannasara is to dismiss them as myth or legend. It is not my purpose here to evaluate the soundness of such anecdotes, but rather, to acknowledge their continued circulation in communities of praxis and to analyze what this circulation implies about the role of the *abhiññās* in the practice lineage of the Mingun Jetavana. The very existence of such narratives is a social phenomenon that cannot be denied, and whether true or not, these narratives have efficacy in the minds of those who hear them, believe or dismiss them, and perpetuate these stories across generations. The nature of monastic biographies and biographical narratives in the context of Burmese historiography must also be considered here. In the Burmese setting, Houtman explains how the “concept for

²⁸² ဒကာ၊ ဒကာမကြီးတို့ ကျေးဇူးကို ဆပ်သောအနေဖြင့် ရဟန်းကိစ္စပြီးအောင် အားထုတ်ချင်တယ်။ ဒီကျောင်းထဲမှာ ဆက်လက်အားထုတ်ရမယ်ဆိုပါကကျောင်းဒကာကြီးတို့ မိသားစုနဲ့တကွ အခြားဒကာ၊ ဒကာမများကိုပါအတွေ့မခံလိုပါ။ [...] ရွာထဲသို့ (၁၀)အိမ်လောက်အထိဆွမ်းခံပြီး ဘုဉ်းပေးပါတော့မယ်။ [...] ဝင်းတံခါး ပိတ်ထားပါမယ်။ [...] သဘောမတူရင် ဒီကျောင်းမှာမနေတော့ဘဲ ဦးပဉ္စင်းတောထဲကို သွားပါတော့မယ် (Prumḥ khyui 2005, 260)

‘biography’ may have many other uses in the vernacular apart from a literary ‘genre’: in everyday Burmese the term is used to mean variously ‘facts,’ ‘events,’ ‘a statement of fact,’ and ‘narration of events’” (Houtman 1997, 311). According to this perspective, a written monastic biography, or even the oral anecdotes seen in the case of Pannasara above, act as a type of historical record, but not just of an individual, or even of a whole lineage, but of the Buddha’s *sāsana* in toto, which could be made to stand in for the nation itself. Houtman points out this “complicated interlinking between vernacular biography and vernacular history” where the actions and achievements of the singular subject, like those of the Mingun Jetavana, the Thilone, or Pannasara, are “not readily confined in time and place” (Houtman 1997, 312). They are not confined in the sense that the educational pedigree, preaching program, miraculous displays, and soteriological attainments of an individual monk or ascetic are imbued with a signification that resonates throughout and reflects upon their monastic and patron networks, to their devotees or detractors, and to those who follow their preaching or practice their meditation techniques. The life course of an individual thereby pervades much broader swaths of Burmese society and history. In this way, when the followers of someone like Pannasara report that he has performed the first *abhiññā* in public, they are not just making a claim about this particular monk and this particular higher form of knowledge, but about the state of Buddhism in their own age.

A second reason for relating the histories of Thilone and especially Pannasara is to reorientate the relationship between scriptural learning and *vipassanā* practice. Although there is tension between learning and meditation in the history above, this tension exists in the life of an individual, not necessarily between divergent communities and types of monastics. While it is only implied in the excerpts of the *Mañḥ kvanḥ jetavan paṭipatti sāsana waṅ* I supplied above, it was precisely the skill that Pannasara had with learning and memorizing texts that led to his

success in meditation practice, or rather, qualified him in the eyes of others. After finishing the BSNA *tipiṭakadhara* exam, Pannasara returned to Bago to meditate in the forest (Pruṃḥ khyui 2005, 257). Eventually he was donated a single-person dwelling near Yangon to meditate alone in isolation, but there was a problem, for

according to [this] situation, if [this] monk retires to the forest as a recluse, it is not practicable; in this situation, it is also not practicable to try to fraternize and live with many [others], [but] if he lives alone, Ashin Pannasara [will] only have about five rains [i.e. years as a fully ordained monk] up to this point, [so] although he had donated the monastery, Ṁḥ Pvaṅ. koṅḥ formally addressed this matter to the Great Mahasi Sayadaw Pheya, [to see whether] it is or is not desirable [for Pannasara] to live alone.²⁸³ (Pruṃḥ khyui 2005, 258)

The nature of the problem is that since Pannasara only had five years of higher ordination, his lay sponsor worried that the monk would be in contravention of the Vinaya, which stipulates a longer period of full ordination in order to practice austerities such as living alone in the forest.²⁸⁴ However, the Mahasi personally consented to this solitary practice, replying that “it is [this] monk who is the very person that has also permanently memorised all five of the Vinaya scriptures. Also, he is sufficient to the same degree in terms of *paṭipatti*, [and] because he is finishing [his] striving, there is no need to be anxious²⁸⁵ (Pruṃḥ khyui 2005, 258). Hence it is precisely because Pannasara had memorized the entire Vinayapiṭaka that he was able to enjoy an

²⁸³ အခြေအနေအရ ဦးပွင့်မှာ တောထွက်ရန်လည်းမဖြစ်၊ အများနှင့်ရော၍လည်း နေ၍မဖြစ်သည့်အခြေအနေတွင် တစ်ပါးတည်းနေရန် ကျောင်းဆောက်လှူခဲ့သော်လည်း အရှင်ပညာသာရမှာ ၅-ဝါမျှသာရှိသေး၍ တစ်ပါးတည်း နေလိုဖြစ်-မဖြစ် မဟာစည်ဆရာတော်ဘုရားကြီးထံ ဦးပွင့်ကောင်းကလျှက်ထားရာ (Pruṃḥ khyui 2005, 258)

²⁸⁴ See Vin V 131³⁵⁻³⁸: “A monk who is possessed of five qualities should not live independently: if he does not know the Observance, if he does not know the (formal) acts for Observance, if he does not know the Pātimokkha, if he does not know the recital of the Pātimokkha, if it is less than five years (since his ordination).” (Vin trans. Horner 1966, VI:210)

²⁸⁵ ရဟန်းတောင်နဲ့စပ်ဆိုင်သော ဝိနည်းငါးကျမ်းစလုံးကိုလည်း အာဂုံဆောင်ထားတဲ့ပုဂ္ဂိုလ်ဖြစ်တယ်။ ပဋိပတ္တိဘက်ကလဲ လုံလောက်သလောက် အားထုတ်ပြီးဖြစ်နေလို့ စိုးရိမ်စရာမရှိဘူး။ (Pruṃḥ khyui 2005, 258)

exception and live alone in the forest practicing meditation,²⁸⁶ even though he had only just or not quite reached the period of five rains as a fully ordained monk. Just like the relationship between *samatha* and *vipassanā* outlined in Chapter Four, the textual study of doctrine and discipline is subsumed in a hierarchical relationship with *vipassanā* in this episode concerning the Pannasara, with both connected through the conceptual framework of a path. In this relationship, the Mahasi is implying that reading the Tipiṭaka, even memorizing it, is not meaningful in a religious sense; only when these texts are combined with the practice of meditation, in this context, with the practice of *vipassanā*, do they become meaningful—is their true potential activated. This connotation is what Htay Hlaing, writing in 1961, meant when he called the texts of the Pali canon “sleeping,” awoken only when they are put into practice (Houtman 1990b, 79). As is demonstrated by the case of Pannasara and his memorisation of the Vinaya, the “transmission” of *vipassanā* methodology from one generation to the next is “like the transmission of tea—you need a tea-cup (the receptacle of scriptural learning) before you can drink it” (Houtman 1990b, 92).

²⁸⁶ What exactly constitutes a “forest” is variously defined in the Vinayaṭiṭaka, causing problems over the millennia in terms of *sīmā* jurisdiction vis-à-vis the village. The main definition of ‘forest’ (Vin III 46²⁷⁻²⁸) is that it is outside the “precincts” of a village, which means beyond a “stone-throw of a man of average height standing at the threshold (of the village gate)” (Vin trans. Horner [1938] 1949, I:74); the *Visuddhimagga* (Vism 73²⁷⁻²⁹) further qualifies what is meant by ‘forest,’ explaining that “[e]ven if the village is close by and the sounds of men are audible to people in the [forest-]monastery, still if it is not possible to go straight to it because of rocks, rivers, etc.,” (Vism trans. Nāṇamoli [1956] 2011, 67) it can be considered a forest-monastery. Given the fact that Pannasara was still able to travel for alms to a nearby village, it does not appear that his ‘forest’ monastery was completely isolated, as in the Thai or Sri Lankan forest traditions. At issue was more the fact that Paññāsāra would not reside with other senior monastics as supports (P. *nissayas*) to guide him in his vocation.

6.5 Lineage of the *Aṭṭhakathā Ācariyas*

With this dynamic between textual learning and meditation practice in mind, another lineage of the Mingun Jetavana reveals itself, namely, the line of *aṭṭhakathā ācariyas* (“masters of commentary”) working in the two-and-a-half-millennia Pali commentarial project. In a telling definition, the word “*aṭṭhakathā*” is glossed in the *Sāratthadīpanī-ṭīkā*, a subcommentary on the *Samantapāsādikā*, as “the authority of the former teachers” (*pubbācariyānubhāvo*) (Endo 2013, 3). This authority is appropriated for the Mingun Jetavana in the preface to his *Nibbān lamḥ ñṇvan*,²⁸⁷ the meditation manual referenced in Chapter Four. In this preface, the modern author(s) lists the “eminent Sayadaws who compiled the *aṭṭhakathā* scriptures” as consisting of “1. Buddhaghosa, 2. Dhammapāla, 3. Upasena, 4. Mahanāma, 5. Buddhadatta, 6. Sāriputta” (Unknown 2018, 1). These six are widely recognized by both Pali scholars and textual communities in South and Southeast Asia as the composers of *aṭṭhakathās*, or at least as the namesakes representing the collectives behind the composition and collation of such texts.²⁸⁸ To this eminent list the preface adds a seventh: “the Original Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw Gyi, whom we are going to discuss. Hence there are seven of these [*aṭṭhakathā*] Sayadaws” (Unknown 2018, 1). This addition of the Mingun Jetavana is striking, given the immense weight these other six commentators are afforded in Theravada textual history. Tin Lwin emphasizes that “according to Burmese orthodoxy,” the first set of *aṭṭhakathā ācariyas* mentioned in the list above are considered to be “*arahats* who knew the attitude of the Buddha (*buddhamatañṇū*), and therefore

²⁸⁷ This preface is not found in the Burmese edition cited earlier, appearing to be a modern composition written for the English translation completed in 2018. Its author is also unknown, as the text is not meant to be sold, but rather, used in the meditation centre for visitors and practitioners who do not speak or read Burmese.

²⁸⁸ The last in this list of names, Sāriputta, is not strictly speaking a composer of *aṭṭhakathā* commentary, since he wrote in the *ṭīkā* genre and was active much later, in the 12th century C.E. (von Hinüber 2000, 172).

the existing *aṭṭhakathā*[s] are treated with high veneration and have been translated by Burmese scholars in *nissaya* style” (Tin Lwin 1961, 16). To thereby include the Mingun Jetavana in this exclusive lineage is to make an extraordinary claim about his attainments, which in turn significantly augments the authority of the texts composed by him. Yet despite the best efforts of the Mingun Jetavana’s devotees, his addition to the lineage of *aṭṭhakathā ācariyas* was not recognised by the Burmese state or the contemporary monastic hierarchy, as the commentaries of the Mingun Jetavana were not admitted to the Sixth Council edition of the Pali canon.

Nonetheless, positioning the Mingun Jetavana in this lineage of *aṭṭhakathā ācariyas* is productive in helping us understand the foundational relationship between the *abhiññās* and the Pali commentarial project. A fundamental example of the connection between the *abhiññās* and *aṭṭhakathās* comes from an account of the First Council in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, the *aṭṭhakathā* on the *Dīghanikāya* attributed to Buddhaghosa.²⁸⁹ The First Council, said to have occurred in Rājagaha just a few months after the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*, serves a pivotal role in establishing the pedigree of the Tipiṭaka, because it was at this event where the Tipiṭaka was purportedly first recited with a view to securing the Pali textual corpus for posterity.²⁹⁰ In the following account, which comes in the *nidāna* (“introduction”) of the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* and thus serves the purpose of providing a *sambandha*, or institutional substratum binding the Tipiṭaka together, the Buddha’s teachings were purportedly recited for several months and standardized by the 500

²⁸⁹ The *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* is taking as its impetus and expanding upon the story of Ānanda from the *Cullavagga* XI (Vin II 285,⁹-293,¹⁴), the locus classicus of this account. See Kākkāpalliye Anuruddha Thera, Mary M.Y. Fung, and S.K. Siu (2008, 3–15) for the most recent English translation of this episode.

²⁹⁰ The actual historicity of the first council, which does not concern us here, has been a much debated topic in Buddhist Studies. See for example, Charles Hallisey (1991) for an overview of this debate and how the council as “event” and “idea” functions in Theravada literary history.

leading monks at the time. Similar to the example of Pannasara above, the link between the *abhiññās* and commentary lies in the fact that for Mahākassapa, the senior monk said to have presided over the First Council, it was necessary that only the most “realized” disciples of the Buddha take part in the recitation process. In the text it is said that Mahākassapa had originally “avoided those many hundreds and thousands who memorised (*dhare*) the whole nine limbs of the master’s scriptural teachings (*satthūsāsanapariyatti*), the common people, the stream-enterers (*sotāpanna*), the once-returners (*sakadāgāmi*), the non-returners (*anāgāmi*) and those monks whose mental defilements (*āsava*) had been destroyed through dry-insight [without achieving any of the *jhānic* states]”²⁹¹ (Sv I 4,⁶⁻⁸). As such, even though there were hundreds and thousands of monastics who had memorised the full Tipiṭaka (at least according to the earlier nine-limbed scheme²⁹²), they were not worthy of participating in the First Council according to the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*. Only those monastics who had “memorised every section of the entire Tipiṭaka” (P. *tipiṭaka-sabba-pariyatti-ppabheda-dhare*) (Sv I 4,⁹) and who possessed “the three knowledges and the like” (P. *tevijja-ādi-bhede*) (Sv I 4,¹¹) were included in the proceedings. Though not synonymous with the *jhānas*, the “three knowledges” (P. *tevijja*)²⁹³ imply having achieved these states and by extension, at least the preliminary *abhiññās*. According to

²⁹¹ *tipiṭakasabbapariyattippabhedadhare paṭisambhidāppatte mahānubhāve yebhuyyena bhagavatā etadaggaṃ āropite tevijjādibhede khīṇāsavabhikkhūyeva ekūnapañcasate pariggahesi* (Sv I 4⁹⁻¹²)

²⁹² The nine-limbed scheme of the Tipiṭaka consists in Pali of *suttam*, *geyyam*, *veyyākaraṇam*, *gātham*, *udānam*, *itivuttakam*, *jātakam*, *abbhutadhammam*, and *vedallam* (see M I 133,²⁴⁻²⁵). Norman laments that it is not always easy to explain to what each of these limbs refers, but claims that “if we follow Buddhaghosa’s interpretations of their meanings,” the nine limbs are not “precise portions of the canon” with clear demarcations, but rather, are “classifications of types of texts,” such that some texts might overlap or fall under more than one type of classification (Norman [1992] 2012, 132).

²⁹³ These *tevijja*, or “three knowledges,” include the *pubbenivāsañāṇa* (“knowledge of past lives”), the *dibbacakkhuñāṇa* (“knowledge of the divine eye”), and the *āsavakkhayañāṇa* (“knowledge of the removal of [karmic] outflows”).

Dhammapāla in his subcommentary on the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* (the *Līnatthavaṇṇanā* analyzed in Chapter Three), those who participated in the First Council were said be “*anubuddhas*,” that is, *arahants* who had also achieved the *jhanic* states, unlocked the powers of the *abhiññās*, and were “still very near to the Buddha himself” (von Hinüber 2013, 381). Such an awesome “authority could never be reached again by any later monk” (von Hinüber 2013, 381). In this institutional history, then, the *abhiññās* are presented as being cardinal to the articulation if not the formation of the Tipiṭaka itself, acting as an imprint of its authority and the authority of those who first undertook its standardization.²⁹⁴

The problem, however, was that the Buddha’s erstwhile attendant, Ānanda, was the quintessential *anubuddha*, the one person present for all of the Buddha’s discourses; yet he did not meet the soteriological threshold, having unlocked neither the *abhiññās* nor having obtained *arahantship*. Given this tension, which threatened the very legitimacy of the Tipiṭaka mass recitation, the most pivotal point in the *nidāna* of the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* is the episode where Ānanda finally achieves the state of *arahatta* and proves himself worthy of leading the recitation of the Suttapiṭaka. In this episode,²⁹⁵ Ānanda finally attains the stage of *arahatta* after feverishly

²⁹⁴ A similar dynamic between the *abhiññās* and textual authority is pointed out by Lammerts in the origin story of *dhammasattha* laws texts in Burma. In the introduction of the *Dhammavilāsa*, for example, the progenitor of the *dhammasattha* texts, Manu, is said to have “went off to the Himavanta forest where he became a {seer-monk (*rasse rahan*)}, observed the noble precepts, and acquired superknowledge (*jhān-abhiññāṇ*) that gave him magical powers [...] Following the king’s request, and in order to instruct (*chumḥ ma*) the people, Manu travelled by means of his superpowers (Pal *iddhi*, Bse. *tan khuiḥ*) to the boundary wall of the universe (*cakravāḷa*)” (D. Christian Lammerts 2018, 63–64). It was there at the “boundary wall of the universe” where Manu was able to retrieve the *dhammasatthas*, meaning that in this case also, the *abhiññās* were fundamental to the earliest formation of this textual corpus.

²⁹⁵ Similar passages are also found in the *Samantapāsādikā*, the *aṭṭhakathā* on the first section of the Vinayapiṭaka (*Vinayapārājīkakaṇḍa*) and in the *aṭṭhakathā* on the *Khuddakapāṭha* of the *Khuddakanikāya*, a commentary also known as the *Paramatthajotikā*. Of all these accounts, Endo comments that the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* is most “conspicuous” in the “enthusiasm” shown toward detailing the actions of Ānanda leading up to and after the council, which can partly be explained by the fact that “tradition has it that the *Dīgha-nikāya* was entrusted to Ānanda and

meditating all day and night, but not in one of the four postures prescribed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* (and fundamental to the Mingun Jetavana’s method), but ironically, in between them,²⁹⁶ as he falls to the bed in exhaustion after having finally relinquished his personal desire for *nibbāna*. Yet crucially for our discussion here, and redolent of the narratives accompanying the Thilone and Pannasara above, the *majjhima-bhāṇakas* (“reciters of the *Majjhima[nikāya]*”) claim that the next day Ānanda, “having dove into the ground” (*pathaviyaṃ nimujjitvā*) (Sv I 11,¹⁰), reappeared at his seat in the cave where the proceedings were to take place, some distance away, in a grand effort to prove to his 499 contemporaries his ultimate accomplishment. In another account pointed out in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, “some say that [Ānanda] took his seat by coming through the air” (*ākāseṇa gantvā nisīdītipi eke*) (Sv I 11,¹¹), which recalls the feat ascribed to the Thilone above. Adding the phrase “be that as it may” (*yathā vā tathā vā hotu*) (Sv I 11,¹¹), the commentary explains that Ānanda takes his place amidst the assembly of the 499 other *arahants* to the cheers of the convener, Mahākassapa (*kassapassa sādhuḥkārādānaṃ yuttameva*) (Sv I 11,¹²⁻¹³), and only then can the First Council commence in earnest. Like the Thilone, the Mingun Jetavana, and Pannasara, Ānanda is a learned monk, the repository of the Buddha’s discourses, and like the Thilone and Pannasara, his internal states of attainment are accompanied and confirmed by a display of the first *abhiññā*, namely, *iddhividhāññāṇa*. The author(s) of the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* is not so certain of the veracity of this episode, as indicated by the phrase

his pupils for chanting,” hence Ānanda became the main focus of his pupils as the head or founder of the *bhāṇakā*-lineage of the *Dīgha-nikāya* and its Commentary” (Endo 2013, 231).

²⁹⁶ *etasmīṃ antare anupādāya āsavehi cittaṃ vimuttaṃ, catuiriyāpathavirahitaṃ therassa arahattaṃ ahoṣi* (Sv I 10¹⁴⁻¹⁶)

“*yathā vā tathā vā hotu*” (“be that as it may”) in his commentary,²⁹⁷ but again, we are not interested in what actually happened, but rather, the significance of the fact that this narrative was passed down in different *bhāṇaka* (“reciter”) traditions and recorded in the *aṭṭhakathā* of the *Dīghanikāya*. What this narrative reveals is that for these institutionalized communities of *bhāṇakas* tasked with recording the contents of the Tipiṭaka in their memory, the fact that Ānanda not only attained *arahantship* the night before the council, but then proved it with a display of the first *abhiññā*, is foundational to the textual history and fundamental authority of the Suttapiṭaka recension as they perceived it.

What this anecdote from the *nidāna* of the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* has in common with the narratives of the Thilone and Pannasara, despite the fact the latter two come two-and-a-half millennia later, is the role the *abhiññās* play in expressing and assuaging underlying anxieties about the vitality and longevity of the *sāsana*. In the case of Ānanda, even though he and the other monastics at the First Council were *anubuddhas*, the catalyst of holding the council was the fear that after the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*, the teachings would become corrupted and quickly die out.²⁹⁸ Likewise, those recording the history of the Thilone take pains to point out that his

²⁹⁷ According to Endo, “this phrase,” *yathā vā tathā vā hotu*, “implies at least the following two hypotheses: 1) Buddhaghosa was merely editing and rearranging the old Sīhaḷa sources, and 2) he was at the same time critical of their content” (Endo 2013, 232).

²⁹⁸ As one account of the First Council found in the *Cullavagga* of the Vinayapiṭaka explains, Mahākassapa was driven to act by the response of one monk named Subhadda to the news of the Buddha’s passing. After some monks reacted emotionally to the news and threw them self from cliffs, while other monks bore it with mindfulness, Subhadda said “Enough, friend, don’t grieve, don’t lament. We are well released from that great recluse; we were troubled by him saying, ‘This is allowable to you and this is not allowable to you.’ Now we will do what we wish and will not do what we don’t” (Vin trans. Kākkāpalliye Anuruddha Thera, Fung, and Siu 2008, 4). To this shocking comment by Subaddha, Mahākassapa proclaimed: “Brothers, let us recite the Dhamma and Vinaya before adhamma shines forth and the Dhamma is rejected, before avinaya shines forth and the Vinaya is rejected, before those who advocate adhamma become strong and those who advocate the Dhamma become weak, before those who advocate avinaya become strong and those who advocate the Vinaya become weak” (Vin trsl. Kākkāpalliye Anuruddha Thera, Fung, and Siu 2008, 4).

demonstration of the first *abhiññā* proves that “the teachings of the Buddha [are] truly real and enlightenment could be achieved even at the present time” (Thi trans. Hla Myat Thu 2013, 17–18). In the early to mid nineteenth century when the Thilone turned to meditation, it was generally believed that the *jhānas*, the *abhiññās*, and *arahantship* were impossible in practice in an age so far removed from the life of the Buddha, but the Thilone’s display of *iddhividhāñāṇa*, at least according to his biographers a century later, was a seminal turning point in the history of the *sāsana* in Burma. When it comes to Pannasara, his role as the first *vinayadhara* in modern times was not that different from the role Ānanda played in the First Council, for without Pannasara’s success in the *tipiṭakadhara* exams, the whole Sixth Council project would have been in jeopardy. The narratives that came later about his display of *iddhividhāñāṇa* were similar to the confirmation Ānanda provided to his fellow *arahants* at the First Council, linking the institutional health of the *sāsana* with the possibilities represented by the presence of the *abhiññās* in the twentieth century. My point in highlighting the role of the *abhiññās* in the different lineages of the Mingun Jetavana is to show that these powers were not peripheral to Theravada Buddhism in the middle of the last century but were at the forefront of larger debates and conceptions of Buddhist history in Burma. Indeed, this central role is exactly what we see in the Mil-a, as the Mingun Jetavana opens the first chapter of the commentary by linking the *abhiññās* and the state of the *sāsana* in his own age of decline and degeneration.

6.6 Discourses of the *Sāsana*’s Longevity and Vitality

Before devling into the anxieties about the *sāsana* that motivate the Mil-a and the larger project of the Mingun Jetavana, we need to flesh out further historical context to the debates about the decline of the *sāsana* in the Burmese setting. We may translate “*sāsana*” as the body of

teachings emanating from the historical Buddha and his immediate disciples, a Pali corpus that was formalized in oral form through the early councils and then maintained by guilds of *bhāṇakas*. It was further standardized in writing just before the turn of the common era in the island of Lanka and passed down through generations of monastics and lay scholars since in interwoven and complementary mediums, including continued recitation, in various types of texts, and as the subject and impetus for art and architecture. The *sāsana* was then filtered through layers of regional editing, revision, amendment, and innovation that travelled on diplomatic and trade routes between South and Southeast Asia, surviving in the present as a diffused body of teaching, but also as institutions built to protect and promulgate this teaching. Alicia Turner, however, points out that “*sāsana* has come to include not just [the Buddha’s] teaching as a body of knowledge but the living practice of following the teachings and the conditions of their flourishing” (Turner 2014, 26). This second more dynamic way of defining the *sāsana* brings out its active epistemological aspect, and in this regard, the perennial debate about the decline of the *sāsana* concerns not just its longevity, its temporal limit, but perhaps more critically, the vitality of the *sāsana*, namely, how much of the Buddha’s genuine teaching remains extant and how much of the Buddha’s emancipatory promise is still accessible through textual study, moral refinement, and the practice of meditation.

Though there has been a long-running debate about the *sāsana*’s longevity and vitality in Theravada civilizations, what is almost universally agreed upon is the fact that its decline is inevitable, as the *sāsana* too is subject to the principal of *anicca* (“impermanence”) that plagues all compounded phenomena. It is this second aspect, however, that concerning the vitality of the *sāsana*, which is more often a source of contention amongst different parties and stakeholders. One example concerns a group of unorthodox monastics called the “*paramats*” first mentioned in

the 1829-Burmese chronicle, the *Mhan nanḥ mahārāja wañ tau krīḥ*

(မှန်နန်းမဟာရာဇဝင်တော်ကြီး: *The Large Royal Chronicle of Great Kings of the Glass Hall*,

usually translated as the *Glass Palace Chronicle*), and traced to the time of King Anawratha

(အနော်ရထာ မင်းစော *Anau ra thā mañḥ co*, r. 1014-1077) (see GPC trans. Pe Maung Tin and

Luce 1921, 74). While “*paramattha*,” the Pali word from which “*paramat*” is derived, usually

has a positive connotation as the “ultimate” ideals and goals of Theravada Buddhism, when

applied to various unorthodox sects in Burmese history, it is often deployed in a derogatory

sense, as a way of labelling a certain group extremist in their views (Mendelson 1975, 73).²⁹⁹

Though there seems to be a great deal of confusion over the exact referent of the label

“*paramat*,”³⁰⁰ Sir James George Scott identifies them as a group that sided with Bodawphaya,

when the latter claimed to be the incarnation of Metteyya, the future buddha (Scott [1882] 1896,

²⁹⁹ To explain this apparent shift in meaning, Houtman speculates that it is possible there has been “a change in Pali etymology of the term *paramattha*, meaning ultimate truth, to *parāmatṭha* [, the past participle of *parāmasati*.] meaning ‘touched, grasped, usually in a bad sense: succumbing to, defiled, corrupted..’. Perhaps these two originally distinct terms have come to be collapsed into one in Burmese” (Houtman 1990b, 273). While this may be a novel solution, part of the reason the term “*paramattha*” is likely used to refer to these groups is that one of the beliefs proscribed to them is the idea that there is an ultimate sort of enlightened consciousness or rather, wisdom, that they worship over and instead of relics of the Buddha and stupas in his honour. See, for example, the accounts of Father Sangermano (1833, 89), Henry Yule (1858, 241–42), and Sir James George Scott ([1882] 1896, 147–49; [1911] 1921, 387–88) with Yule describing the *paramats* as professing “a fundamental doctrine that Divine Wisdom, not concentrated in any existing spirit or embodied in any form, but diffused throughout the universe, and partaken in a different degrees by various intelligences, and in a very high degree by the Buddhas, is the true and only God” (Yule 1858, 241) Yet given the unreliability of these accounts and a possible bent towards sensationalism from their sources, none of whom are Burmese, it is difficult to be sure of any such attributions of doctrine to this group.

³⁰⁰ Sir James George Scott’s account of the *paramats* from 1882, for instance, while capturing some of the core tenets of the *paramats*, is so broad and at times inconsistent that it appears he is lumping several groups together under a single umbrella term (see Scott [1882] 1896, 147–49). Mendelson provides several historical accounts of the *paramats* in addition to Scott’s (see Mendelson 1975, 73–76), and very wisely cautions that “[c]onsidering the variety of usage for the word *paramat*, we might best accept it as a relative, category term attached to a variety of extremist sects by outsiders knowing little and caring less about historical details” (Mendelson 1975, 77). He also points out that the term “*paramat*” has been used to described some of the so-called Mindon sects, especially the Hngettwin, known for their ascetic and disciplinary extremism (Mendelson 1975, 86). Yet Jacques Leider takes issue with Mendelson’s own equivocation of *paramats* with the contemporary Shan-based Zoti, or Zawti monastic communities (from the Pali “*joti*,” meaning “light” or “radiance”) (Leider 2004, 125 n. 25).

148).³⁰¹ This suggests that the *paramats* held the “extreme” view that the current *sāsana* age of the Buddha Sakyamuni had indeed ended by the eighteenth century, a necessary precondition in Theravada eschatology for the coming of the next buddha, who in this instance was said to have taken the form of the Burmese monarch. Perhaps conflating the *paramats* and the *zoti*, or *zawti* monastic community, Scott offers another account of a group he calls the “Māns,” whom he describes as “anti-clericals” active in the middle of the nineteenth century (Scott [1911] 1921, 387). According to Scott, while all so-called “orthodox Buddhists” revere the triple gems of the Buddha, the *dhamma*, and the *saṅgha*, this group “rejected the third,” insisting that “there was no obligation on the laity to minister to the wants of the monks” (Scott [1911] 1921, 388). Nyein Chan Maung explains further that for this group, the *sāsana* only existed for 1000 years after the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*, after which, any person taking the *upasampāda* did so entirely in vain (Nyein Chan Maung 2006, 22–23).³⁰² As such, Mendelson identifies these “Māns” as part of a broader “anticlerical trend [...] in the mid-nineteenth century” (Mendelson 1975, 87), and while we cannot discount political or economic motivations behind the anticlerical bent of such groups, some of them clearly considered their age as representing an advanced stage of *sāsana* anemia, if not extinction, which caused them to deny not only the possibility of one becoming an *arahant*, but even the validity of *upasampadā* in pre- and early-modern Burma.

³⁰¹ Mendelson points out a possible confusion here in Scott’s account, as in “other sources” King Bodawphaya “appears to have persecuted Paramats,” but Mendelson suggests a generous reading might be to consider that King Bodawphaya changed his stance towards this group during his reign (Mendelson 1975, 76).

³⁰² Nyein Chan Maung gives the following publication as the source for this information: “U Tin; *Myanmarin Okchokpan Sādan* (Myanmar Traditional Administration), Vol. III, Yangon, Central Printing House, 1970, reprinted, p. 135” (Nyein Chan Maung 2006, 23).

Moving to the twentieth century, we saw in the last chapter that some groups took the opposite position, advocating that it was in fact possible to achieve *arahantship* in the twentieth century. This view is espoused by certain groups associated with the modern reform movement of *vipassanā* meditation, including the praxis-oriented communities of the Mingun Jetavana. While we will explore more of the Mingun Jetavana’s views on this issue in the current and subsequent chapters, a second prominent group that believed in the twentieth-century rejuvenation of the *sāsana*’s vitality revolved around U Ba Khin introduced in Chapter Three as part of the lay-lineage of meditation teachers tracing itself to the Ledi.³⁰³ Daniel Stuart explains that U Ba Khin held the view that two and a half millennia after the *parinibbāna* of the Buddha, which was celebrated in Burma in 1954, “the clock of *vipassanā* ha[d] struck” (Stuart 2022, 116), meaning that the *sāsana* had entered an era of liberation (ဝိမုတ္တိခေတ် *vimutti khet*) where practitioners of *vipassanā* could once again attain to the highest stages of the Theravada path (Stuart 2022, 115). According to U Ba Khin, “[t]he *Vimutti* Era is the first 500 years that come after [the first] 2500 years of the *sāsana*. The current time ([i.e., the mid-twentieth century]) is included in the *Vimutti* Era, and so people should practice meditation” (Stuart 2022, 115 fn. 205).³⁰⁴ By this reckoning, then, the era of liberation would last from approximately 1954 to

³⁰³ For his part, the Ledi did not appear as optimistic about the vitality of the *sāsana*. Aye Win reports that in a 1907-*pucchāvisajjanā* (“questions and answers”) text between the Manle Sayadaw (မာနိလညာဆရာတော် *Mān laññ cha rā tau*, 1842-1921) and him, the Ledi put forth a question about whether it was possible for one to become a *sotāpanna* when the *sāsana* had “gone extinct” (Aye Win 2015, 43–44). Further, the Ledi stated, at least privately, that his aim was not to strive for *arahantship*, but rather, that “in the future, I will be brave and unsurpassed during the victory of the next buddha, Metteyya” (Braun 2013, 42), implying that he believed the possibilities open to him in the current *sāsana* age of the Buddha Sakyamuni were limited.

³⁰⁴ Another aspect of this belief espoused by U Ba Khin is that during “the *Vimutti* Era,” the *sāsana* would spread to and flourish in the land of its birth, the country now called “India” (Stuart 2022, 115). Hence the idea of “the *Vimutti* Era” and its geographical underpinnings have special relevance to the teachings and meditation movement of S.N. Goenka (1924-1979), the Indian, Burma-born student of U Ba Khin who established the largest network of *vipassanā* centres outside of Burma and around the world. For more on S.N. Goenka, see Stuart (2020).

2454, a remarkable claim that contrasts sharply with the views of the *paramats* above. While U Ba Khin’s meditation lineage is relatively minor in Burma compared to that of the Mingun Jetavana via the Mahasi (but perhaps the world’s largest via S.N. Goenka in India), as the first Accountant General of Burma under the U Nu administration and a prominent member of the BSNA,³⁰⁵ his views could not be so easily dismissed. In fact, Pranke informs us that this idea of a *vimutti khet* “was taken up for consideration by the Sixth Buddhist Synod (1954–1956) which rejected it as contradictory and as lacking textual support” (Pranke 2010, 466).³⁰⁶ He adds that “[s]ubsequent publications by the Ministry of Religious Affairs that discuss the *sāsana*’s lifespan omit reference to th[is] theory,” and as a result, the idea has not been “universally accepted” (Pranke 2010, 466). Other prominent monks of a more positivistic orientation also rejected the *vimutti khet* theory, such as Ukkattha, the erstwhile president of the editing committee for the Sixth Council first encountered in Chapter One. According to Jordt, Ukkattha “did not accept the so-called *paṭipatti sāsana* and therefore did not accept the possibility of achieving *nibbāna* in this life” (Jordt 2007, 52). All these cases demonstrate that “discourse[s] of the decline of the *sāsana* and its preservation are multiple and varied in Buddhist history, evolving in consort with the goals of each instance of reform” (Turner 2014, 27). For advocates of modern reform *vipassanā* in particular, it was important to not only frame the *sāsana* as vibrant and vivacious, but as in a

³⁰⁵ Along with helping to oversee the budget and fundraising activities of the Sixth Council, U Ba Khin was also the “Chairmen of the Subcommittee for *Paṭipatti*” at the BSNA (trsl. Bischoff [1992] 2003, 33), placing him at the centre of the U Nu administration’s efforts to promote meditation in the independence period

³⁰⁶ Pranke points us to pages 139-147 of the following text as reference: *Aṭṭhakathā-saṃgāyanā paṭhama-sannipāta saṃgāyanā cī cac khaṇḥ* (အဋ္ဌကထာသံဂါယနာ ပဌမသန္နိပါတ် သံဂါယနာ စီစစ်ခဏ်း) [Council and Commentary, The First Session of the Council: An Opportunity to Consider] (Pranke 2010, 466). This text lists the Mahasi as one of its authors, as well as the Pakokku Sayadaw (ပခုက္ကူဆရာတော် *pakhukkū cha rā tau*), who Mendelson describes as “politically active, having been a Maha Sangha Ahpwe member in 1946, a moving force in the Burma Hill Tracts Buddhist Mission group, and one of the leaders at the Sangayana opening ceremonies (Mendelson 1975, 288).

state of renewal promising almost the same emancipatory potential as the time of the Buddha itself.

What these divergent opinions on the longevity and vitality of the *sāsana* reveal is that this category constituted a “living and adaptive discourse, one able to interpret changes and drive reforms” (Turner 2014, 27). As such, it is not surprising that questions about *sāsana* decline were particularly pertinent to people in Burma at the turn of the twentieth century, given the forced removal of the last Konbaung monarch by the British, the pillaging of the royal library and its vast collection of palm-leaf manuscripts (ပေထုတ် *pe thup*) and accordion-style leporellos (ပရိုက် *pa ra buik*) by occupying forces,³⁰⁷ and the violence wrought against the population to repress local insurgencies and counter the backlash to the *sāsana*-less, alien rule imposed upon them. In the face of such epic transformations, Turner points out that both “Burmese and Pali sources on *sāsana* decline became well known by the end of the nineteenth century, offering detailed narratives that could be used both to explain the problems of colonialism and to offer modes of response” (Turner 2014, 28). One such source that became especially popular was the *Sāsanālaṅkāra cā tamḥ* (သာသနာလင်္ကာရတံဃ်း *Record of Sāsana Augmentation*) from 1831 (Pranke 2008, 9 fn. 22), what Turner describes as “the first in a series of nineteenth-century texts to discuss the stages [of *sāsana* decline] in detail” (Turner 2014, 28). Following this text, there was a renewal of interest in a much older genre of texts, the *Anāgatavaṃsas* (*History of the*

³⁰⁷ In a shocking artefact from the period of imperial scholarship, Bode seems either to have been unaware of this disaster or attempted to gloss over it, writing in her *Pali Literature of Burma* that when the British army occupied Mandalay, “[t]he palace and even the monastery libraries paid their tribute to the conquerors, who, fortunately, were careful (like Anorata) to bear their treasure to safe places, house it with honour, and keep it within the reach of inquiring scholars” (Bode 1909, 94). In truth, the palace and its library were extensively looted, with an unknown amount of material destroyed in a conflagration that lasted several days. Such an incident must have been an extremely ominous sign to the local population already anxious about the fate of the *sāsana* under foreign rule.

Future) (Turner 2014, 29). This collection of texts and its subgenres included “records of Buddha’s predictions about the five thousand years of *sāsana* in Burma that, among others, underlay *rājavan* [(“chronicles of kings”)] narratives about the transitions of political power in the country” (Kirichenko 2015, 806), demonstrating the relevance of such discussions not just for the religious sphere, but in the realm of politics as well. Indeed, the *Anāgatavaṃsa* texts and their Burmese commentaries were “known and valued well beyond the circles of monastic scholasticism” (Turner 2014, 29), with “the 1907 edition” of the *Anāgatavaṃsa* and its vernacular commentary “published in ten thousand copies, each costing only six *pya*, a publishing run rivaled only by the largest missionary tracts” (Turner 2014, 31). While these texts were primarily concerned with the loss of *pariyatti*, or textual learning, they were also “deeply entangled in the origins of Buddhist revival” in the first few decades of the twentieth century (Turner 2014, 31), among which we must include the early stages of modern, reform *vipassanā*. For instance, the Ledi also adds his own installment to this debate with his *Sāsanavisodhanī* (*Purification of the Sāsana*) from 1919, which “includes extensive discussions of stages and signs of decline” (Turner 2014, 162 n. 18).³⁰⁸ 16 years later in 1935, Adiccavaṃsa introduced in Chapter One and discussed in Chapter Three as the author of a *Milinda-nissaya*, wrote the *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa* (ဘိက္ခုနီသာသနောပဒေသ *Instruction on the Sāsana of Nuns*), the final 78 pages of which discuss several theories of *sāsana* decline, including those found in the Mil, in the *aṭṭhakathās*, those attributed to the Ledi, those views of Adiccavaṃsa’s contemporaries, and his own unorthodox position (discussed in Chapter Eight). Although not

³⁰⁸ For example, the Ledi appears to argue against the *Zoti/Zawti* mentioned above, writing in his *Sāsanavisodhanī* that “[s]ome say, ‘When a thousand years have passed, just on that next day the great *sāsana* disappears all at once. Starting from that day, there is no *Buddhasāsana*.’ One should not believe this” (trsl. Braun 2013, 201 n. 128).

known as a representative of *paṭipatti*, Adiccavamsa links the vitality of the *sāsana* with the practice of *vipassanā* in his *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa*. After Adiccavamsa, the Mahāgandhārum Sayadaw (မဟာဂန္ဓဝရီဆရာတော် a.k.a., အရှင်ဇနကာဘိဝံသ Arhan janakābhivamsa, 1900-1977, better known as the Mahagandhayon Sayadaw) published his *Anāgat sāsanaṅ reh* (အနာဂတ်သာသနာရေး: *State of the Sāsana's Future*), which he composed not so much to provide an outline of the different theories of *sāsana* decline, but with the intent “to improve or reform the Sāsana” for posterity (Thi Thi Mya 2007, 82). All these examples are meant to demonstrate that the issue of *sāsana* decline was very much an active and open topic of debate and discussion when the Mingun Jetavana composed his Mil-a.³⁰⁹

Despite the contrasting schemes of *sāsana* decline outlined above, the conventional consensus in Burma during the early twentieth century when the Mingun Jetavana and his contemporaries were writing held that the *sāsana* would last only 5000 years, which is part of the reason why the halfway point of 1954 was such a seminal moment in *sāsana* history. This 5000-year timeline of the *sāsana* is not found in the Tipiṭaka itself but “appear[s] for the first time in the commentarial literature of the Pāli tradition” (Endo 2013, 136). Although there are many discrepancies in the accounts of this process of degeneration among the various commentaries (Endo 2013, 135), discrepancies which were taken up by subsequent Pali subcommentaries and vernacular works afterwards, most *aṭṭhakathās* “describe the gradual waning of the *sāsana* in

³⁰⁹ Anne Hansen discusses another set of discourses about *sāsana* history known as *damṇāy* that circulated in colonial Cambodia in the mid- to late nineteenth century, containing “prophecies spoken by the Buddha to figures such as his disciple Ānanda or to King Pasenadi of Kosala (Hansen 2007, 60). Such texts heralded the coming of a “*dhammik* as a savior-ruler figure who will arrive to save the good and pure from the social chaos wrought in large part by the corruption and moral excesses of those in power who have declined to preserve the Dhamma and thus triggered social ruin” a were part of a rising millenarian movement in the region that threatened French rule (Hansen 2007, 60).

five 1,000-year stages called the five disappearances (*antaradhāna*)” (Pranke 2008, 16 fn. 38).³¹⁰ According to the *antaradhānas* as given in the *Manorathapūraṇī*, the *aṭṭhakathā* on the *Aṅguttaranikāya* (*The Numerical Discourse*) representing the “most detailed” and “perhaps the latest innovations” of the *aṭṭhakathās*’ scheme of *sāsana* decline, the first aspect of the Buddha’s teachings to disappear is attainment (P. *adhigama*), such as the ability to reach *arahantship* and the other three lower fruits, followed by the disappearance of practice (P. *paṭipatti*), then scriptural learning (P. *pariyatti*), the disappearance of outward signs (P. *liṅga*) of the religion, and culminating with the disappearance of the Buddha’s relics (P. *dhātu*) (Endo 2013, 129). The author(s) of the *Manorathapūraṇī* explain that “*adhigama*” here mean the disappearance of “the four *magga*-s, four *phala*-s, four *paṭisambhidā*-s, three *vijjā*-s, and six *abhiññā*-s” (Endo 2013, 129). Hence in this scheme, the *abhiññās* assume a key role as one of the outward signs of *adhigama*, which in part explains the stress given them in the stories of the Thilone and Pannasara, and why the *abhiññās* were front and centre in the Mingun Jetavana’s Mil-a, to which we now turn.

³¹⁰ The concept of the *antaradhāna* is perhaps first seen in the Mil, which lists three such stages, without aligning them into a particular times or adhering to the 5000-limit of the *sāsana* (Endo 2013, 126). These stages begin with *adhigama-antaradhāna* (“disappearance of attainment”), followed by *paṭipatti-antaradhāna* (“disappearance of religious practice”), and capped by *liṅga-antaradhāna* (“disappearance of signs”) (Endo 2013, 126). With this innovation, the Mil “shows a new classification of the disappearance of the True Dhamma, a step further than its canonical interpretation, and this classification can be regarded as a link connecting the Canon to the commentaries” (Endo 2013, 127).

6.7 *Abhiññās* and the *Sāsana Parihīne*

The first chapter of the Mingun Jetavana’s *Mil-a*, and the beginning of the commentary proper, is titled the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa* (*Chapter on Previous Connections*). Corresponding to what Trenckner calls the *Bāhirakathā*, this chapter covers the meeting between the two protagonists in their past lives, King Milinda’s harassment of the *saṅgha* through his dilemmatic questions, and the efforts of the head monk at the time, Assagutta, to find Nāgasena in a heavenly realm, have him reborn in human form, and defeat the king in debate. In order for the *saṅgha* to subdue Milinda, subtle but frequent recourse is needed in the root text to the *abhiññās*, instances of which include millions of monks flying over the Himalayas, the reading of a pupil’s mind by their teacher, and knowledge of the past and future. I.B. Horner, downplaying the role of the *abhiññās* in the *Mil*, explains that “[b]ecause meditation, *jhāna*, and super-knowledges, *abhiññā*, are not controversial topics and hardly lend themselves to inconsistent utterances, no dilemma is based on them. Nor are they features of *Miln.* as they are of the *Nikāyas*, especially the *Majjhima*” (Horner 1963, xxxii). The Mingun Jetavana disagree. Covering 80 pages out of more than 500 in the original 1949 edition, the bulk of the first chapter of the *Mil-a* extrapolates the fleeting references to the *abhiññās* in the root text, elaborating them through copious citations from the *Vism*. Hence for the Mingun Jetavana, the *abhiññās* are an integral part of the *Mil* from the very start, and his task as commentator is to begin by pointing this fact out to the twentieth-century reader.

The Mingun Jetavana invokes the *abhiññās* immediately by tackling the efficient cause of the first chapter itself—the *abhiññā* of the *pubbenivāsañāṇa*, or “knowledge of past lives.” Indeed, the first point that needs to be explained about the *Mil* is how the past lives of Nāgasena and Milinda came to light without the usual impetus and explanatory infrastructure of a *jātaka*

tale, namely, the purported omniscience of a Buddha. To introduce his discussion of the *abhiññās*, the Mingun Jetavana takes aim at the compound “*pubbayogo*” in the title of the chapter, invoking the primary function of commentary, *pad’attha*. Following the lead of the root text, which also takes up this compound for explication, he nonetheless drives the discussion into a new direction, explaining that:

[the word] “*pubbayogo*” means a deed formerly done by them. Who is to relate this? The person who has acquired remembrance of their past lives, this one is to relate it. Who has obtained remembrance of [their] past lives? One who has made the necessary preparations for the knowledge of one’s past lives. Who has acquired this [knowledge]? How does one acquire this? In answer to the question, “how are there preparations for that [knowledge of past lives]?” a discourse on knowledge recollected from past lives should be related.³¹¹

Here, the Mingun Jetavana analyses the word “*pubbayogo*” with a series of recursive questions and answers, preparing for and expanding the parameters of the discussion to follow. By way of “discourse” (*kathā*), the Mingun Jetavana supplies the explanation of *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa* as found in the *Vism*. This question-and-answer type of analysis of the word “*pubbayogo*” also affords the commentator the flexibility to deal with potential objections and critiques—the *anuyoga* and *parihāra* functions of commentary.

After raising this set of questions about *pubbenivāsañāṇa*, the Mingun Jetavana next defends the existence of this *abhiññā* by deploying the classical commentarial convention of the unnamed detractor, a common motif in the medieval *aṭṭhakathās* (see Mori 1991, 141). This unprovoked apologetic stance by the Mingun Jetavana, made at almost the beginning of his *Mil-*a, suggests that there are contemporary discourses about the *pubbenivāsañāṇa* in particular and

³¹¹ *pubbayogo ti tesam pubbakammaṃ/ taṃ kena kathetabbaṃ/ yo pubbenivāsañāṇaṃ labhati/ tena kathetabbaṃ/ pubbenivāsañāṇaṃ kena laddhaṃ/ yo pubbenivāsañāṇassa parikammaṃ karoti/ tena laddhaṃ/ yaṃ pubbenivāsañāṇassa parikammaṃ taṃ kathaṃ ti pucchāya vissajjane pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇakathā kathetabbā* (*Mil-a* 7,¹⁻⁵)

the *abhiññās* more broadly in which the commentator wishes to intervene. He explicitly stakes his position using a sentence structure more suitable to the polemics of the *Kathāvatthu*, the fifth text of the Abhidhammapiṭaka introducing and refuting rival theories and views. In a pivotal passage also noted by Deshpande (1999, 7), the Mingun Jetavana states that “Indeed, it should not be said that ‘this [talk about the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa*] should not be discussed because it is an impossibility³¹² (*aṭṭhāne*).³¹³ Why?’”³¹⁴ In this highly polemical passage, the Mingun Jetavana is opening up his commentary to questions about what is and is not possible in twentieth-century Burma vis-à-vis the *sāsana*. What he is saying in the disputatious style of the *Kathāvatthu* is that it is improper for one to claim that the acquisition of the *pubbenivāsañāṇa* is impossible at present, namely, in the middle of the twentieth century.

In answer to his own question of why such a pessimistic attitude to *pubbenivāsañāṇa* is improper, the Mingun Jetavana replies: “When the teaching of the Blessed One, the Buddha, has decayed (*sāsane parihīne*), those who have obtained knowledge of the various supernormal powers (*iddhividhañāṇa*) are not many.”³¹⁵ In this quote the Mingun Jetavan explicitly locates

³¹² The word “*aṭṭhāne*” in the sense of “impossibility” might be an allusion to the *Mahāsīhanāda sutta* (*Discourse of the Great Lion’s Roar*) of the *Majjhimanikāya*, where there is a reference to the ten powers of the Buddha. The first power of the Buddha is the ability to know (P. *pajānāti*) the possible (P. *ṭhānaṃ*) as possible (P. *ṭhānato*) and to know the impossible (P. *aṭṭhānaṃ*) as impossible (P. *aṭṭhanato*), both as they really are (*yathābhutaṃ*) (*ṭhānañ-ca ṭhānato aṭṭhānañ-ca aṭṭhānato yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti. Yam pi Sāriputta Tathāgato ṭhānañ ca ṭhānato aṭṭhānañ-ca aṭṭhānato yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti*) (M I 69,³⁴⁻³⁷).

³¹³ One could also take “*aṭṭhāne*” in the locative case as consisting of the negative prefix “*a*” joined with the verb root “*tha*” (“to stand”), meaning “in the wrong place” or “non-place.” Taking “*aṭṭhāne*” as “in the wrong place” also suggests that the author is being pre-emptively polemical, defending against anyone who might challenge that a commentary on the *Mil* is not the “right place” to discuss the *abhiññās*. Either way, as “impossibility” or “wrong place,” this sentence at the beginning of the chapter establishes a tone of defense and debate for the rest of the Mingun Jetavana’s commentary.

³¹⁴ *Na heva kho panesā aṭṭhāne kathetabbā ti na vattabbaṃ. Kasmā* (Mil-a 7,⁵⁻⁶)

³¹⁵ *buddhassa hi bhagavato sāsane parihīne iddhiḍḍhaññāṇalābhi pi bahulo na hoti* (Mil-a 7,⁶⁻⁷)

his commentary in an age “where the *sāsana* has fallen away” (P. *sāsane parihīne*), but like the account of the *antaradhānas* seen in the *Manorathapūraṇī*, he links the diagnosis of decline with the *abhiññās*, starting with the *iddhividhañāṇa*, the knowledge of the various supernormal powers implicated in the cases of the Thilone and Pannasara above. This link implies that even though the Mingun Jetavana writes under an advanced stage of *sāsana* decay, he considers the *iddhividhañāṇa* and at least the *pubbenivāsañāṇa* to still be attainable. Notice that in the previous quotation, the Mingun Jetavana refrains from saying outright that such attainments are not possible in the middle of the twentieth century, only that “there are not many” (P. *bahulo na hoti*) who possess them at present. Thus, although he recognizes his own age as one of *sāsana parihīna*, the Mingun Jetavana is nonetheless cautiously optimistic about the possibilities of attainment (P. *paṭivedha*) for those practicing meditation today.

In the next line of the Mil-a, the Mingun Jetavana boldly criticize his contemporaries in terms of the dynamic between the decline of the *sāsana* and the *abhiññās*. In brusque and combative language also noted by Deshpande (1999, 7), the Mingun Jetavana, in an apparent display of sarcasm, charges that there are “numerous ignorant ones who do not wish to discuss even the mere utterance that” there is a possibility that there “are [living] monks endowed with the knowledge of the path, the knowledge of the fruits, and the knowledge of the duties of the *abhiññās*.”³¹⁶ Such ignorant ones, who by implication fail to understand the nature of *sāsana* decline, “do not have faith” (P. *na saddahati*) (Mil-a 7,¹⁵), according to the Mingun Jetavana, that is, do not have faith that the *abhiññās* and the attainments they represent are possible in the

³¹⁶ *maggañāṇena ca samannāgataṃ phalañāṇena ca samannāgataṃ abhiññāṅkiccañāṇena ca samannāgataṃ āyasmantaṃ atthī ti vacanamattaṃ pi akathetukāmo appas[s]uto va bahulo hoti* (Mil-a 7,¹²⁻¹⁵)

middle of the twentieth century. The first two knowledges the Mingun Jetavana flags here, that of the path (P. *magga*) and that of the fruits (P. *phalas*) of the path, are familiar to us from the last two chapters, since these are the goals of his *vipassanā* programme; the third element of the enlightenment trifecta above, that of the knowledge of the duties of the *abhiññās* (P. *abhiññā-kicca-ñāṇa*), does not as easily fit in the Mingun Jetavana's meditation system, demonstrating the special emphasis he is putting on the *abhiññās* at this crucial point in his commentary. It is also not clear to whom the Mingun Jetavana is attacking here. Perhaps he has in mind the “*paramats*” mentioned above, those who believed the *sāsana* had already gone extinct 1500 years ago. But if so, his specific point about the *abhiññās* still being possible is an overstatement, since these *paramats* did not even hold that *upasampadā* was still possible, not to mention the *abhiññās*. More likely the Mingun Jetavana had in mind his contemporaries who adhered to the 5000-year lifespan of the *sāsana* but maintained that in the present stage of *antaradhāna*, the *jhānas* and by extension, the *abhiññās*, were simply out of reach, not simply in practice, but in principle.

There is, however, an apparent discrepancy here with what the Mingun Jetavana claims later in the Mil-a, when he supplies his own schema of *sāsana* decline which fits within the 5000 years prescribed by the commentaries but does not appear to leave room for the possibility of the *abhiññās*. In his commentary on the *Meṇḍakapañhā* section of the root text, in the midst of his argument for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* (see Chapter Eight), the Mingun Jetavana offers his own explanation for why the *sāsana* will last for 5000 years:

“A thousand years” is said because of those who have destroyed the outflows (*khīṇāsava*) and have obtained the various kinds of analytic insights (*paṭisambhidā*). But in addition to that, because of those who have destroyed the outflows through dry insight (*sukkhavipassaka*), [another] thousand years [is added]. A thousand [more] years [is added] because of the state of *anāgāmi* (“non-returning”); a [further] thousand years [is added] because of the state of *sakadāgāmi* (“once-returning”); a [final] thousand years [is added] because of the state of *sotāpanna* (“stream-entry”). Thus the true *dhamma* of

attainments (*paṭivedhasaddhamma*) will last 5000 years. The *dhamma* of [scriptural] learning (*pariyattidhamma*) will also last for 5,000 years; for with the non-existence of [scriptural] learning, there is no attainment. But with the existence of [scriptural] learning, there is attainment. But even if [scriptural] learning has disappeared, the outward signs [of the true *dhamma*, such as the robes of monks etc.] will continue to exist for a long time.³¹⁷

What is unique about this scheme is that instead of focusing on the *antaradhānas*, that is, what will disappear, the Mingun Jetavana stresses the inverse, highlighting the attainments rooted in practice that function to prolong the life of the *sāsana*. This inverse perspective foregrounds not the *sāsana*'s decline so much as its continued vitality, albeit in a gradually weakened form. The second unique quality of the Mingun Jetavana's schema above is its downplaying of *pariyatti*, or scriptural learning. While he does make *pariyatti* the condition for *paṭivedha* ("attainments"), note that when he references *paṭivedha*, he uses the term "*saddhamma*" ("true *dhamma*"), but for *pariyatti*, he only uses "*dhamma*."³¹⁸ Such a *paṭipatti*-centric scheme is what we would expect from someone dedicated to meditation as the force driving the maintenance and representing the essence of the *sāsana*, as opposed to *pariyatti*, which is the usual focal point of such narratives of decline.³¹⁹

³¹⁷ *sahassaṃ ti cetam paṭisambhidāppabhedappattakhīṇāsavavasena vuttam/ tato pana uttari pi sukkhavipassakakhīṇāsavavasena vassasahassaṃ/ anāgāmivasena vassasahassaṃ/ sakadāgāmivasena vassasahassaṃ/ sotāpannavasena vassasahassaṃ ti evaṃ pañcavassasahassān paṭivedhasaddhammo ṭhassati/ pariyattidhammo pi tāni yeva/ na hi pariyattiyā asati paṭivedho addhi/ nāpi pariyattiyā sati paṭivedho na hoti/ liṅgam pana pariyattiyā antarahitāya pi citam pavattissatī ti* (Mil-a 194,³³-195,⁶)

³¹⁸ For a discussion on the causal dynamics between *paṭipatti* and *pariyatti* in the commentarial accounts of *sāsana* decline, see Endo (2013, 136). Note that in some of the commentaries, *pariyatti* is also paired with *dhamma*, without designating it as "*saddhamma*." The Mingun Jetavana may be simply following the lead of the *aṭṭhakathās* on this matter, but it is clear that he is not putting the same stress on the role of *pariyatti* as we see in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*, the *Papañcasūdanī* (the *aṭṭhakathā* on the *Majjhimanikāya*), and the *Manorathapūraṇī* (Endo 2013, 138).

³¹⁹ Endo, for instance, identifies an emphasis on *pariyatti* in the commentarial accounts of *sāsana* decline, owing, in his estimation, to "reasons arising from socio-political and religious changes that Theravāda Buddhism would experience from about the 1st century B.C. onwards in Sri Lanka," especially the setting down of the Tipiṭaka in writing (Endo 2013, 127). Turner too signals that it was particularly the loss of *pariyatti* at the onset of colonial rule that worried Burmese Buddhists, especially because "the loss of *pariyatti* corresponded most directly with the concern that the loss of royal patronage meant a decline of monastic scholarship and a broader knowledge of the

According to the Mingun Jetavana’s schema above, the first stage in the ontogeny of the *sāsana* is characterized by the compound *paṭisambhidā-pabheda-patta-khīṇa-āsava*, which means “the one who has extinguished (P. *khīṇa*) the karmic outflows (P. *āsava*) [by] having obtained (P. *patta*) the various (P. *pabheda*) analytical insights (P. *paṭisambhidā*).” The key component of this compound is “*paṭisambhidā*,” which refers to the four “insights,” “discriminations,” or “abilities.” These include the ability to analyze meaning (P. *attha-paṭisambhidā*), to analyze “ideas” or “states” (P. *dhamma-paṭisambhidā*), to analyze language and grammar according to reality (P. *nirutti-paṭisambhidā*), and the ability to explain the first three insights in a lucid and concise manner (P. *paṭibhāna-paṭisambhidā*) (see PMED, PEG, MBTD, s.v. *paṭisambhidā*; MEED, s.v. ဝဇ္ဇိဝဇ္ဇိဒ္ဓိ). At first sight, these four *paṭisambhidās* or “discriminations” do not appear to have any direct relevance to becoming an *arahant*, but the connection is spelled out in the *Vibhaṅga*, the second text of the Abhidhammapiṭaka, which explains that “[t]he knowledge of suffering is the ‘analytical knowledge’ of the true meaning (*attha-paṭisambhidā*), the knowledge of its origin is the ‘analytical knowledge’ of the law (*dhamma-paṭisambhidā*). The knowledge of the cause [of suffering] is the ‘analytical knowledge’ of the law (*dhamma-paṭisambhidā*), the knowledge of the result of the cause is the ‘analytical knowledge’ of the true meaning (*attha-paṭisambhidā*)” (Vibh trans. Nyanatiloka [1952a] 1980, 260). In other words, the *paṭisambhidās*, especially the first two (the last two being derivative in nature), represent the realization of the Four Noble Truths, meaning that one has thus completed the Noble Eightfold Path in its entirety. Given this equivalency, “the formula that someone attains arahatship with the discriminations [...] is frequent in later literature (Shaw

dhamma” (Turner 2014, 32). As we see in the passage quoted above, the Mingun Jetavana does address the loss of *pariyatti* in his scheme, but he shifts focus to *paṭipatti*, with textual learning in the background.

2014, 256 n. 52). Indeed, in the *Apadāna* of the *Khuddakanikāya*, “we read that Sāriputta and others had realized the four discriminations, eight liberations, and six direct-knowledge,” that is, the *abhiññās* (Warder 1982, ix). The *Niddesa*, also from the *Khuddakanikāya*, elaborates this connection between the *paṭisambhidā* and the *abhiññās* further, stating the “being a *paṭibhānavant*,” a reference to the fourth *paṭisambhidā*, includes having acquired all the qualities of an enlightened being, culminating in the *abhiññās* and the *tevijjas* (“three knowledges”), two of which are standard *abhiññās* themselves (Warder 1982, ix).³²⁰ And finally, in the definition of the first *antaradhāna* of the *Manorathapūraṇī*, the loss of *adhigama*, the *paṭisambhidās* are explicitly paired with the *tevijjas* and the *abhiññās*, with the commentary adding that when *adhigama* “dwindl[es] away, [it] begin[s] with [the] *paṭisambhidā*-s” (Endo 2013, 129). In essence, then, what the Mingun Jetavana is referencing in this first stage of *sāsana* prolongation is the full spectrum of enlightenment, culminating in the “knowledge of the duties of the *abhiññās*” (P. *abhiññākiccañāṇa*).

The above reading of the *paṭisambhidās* as being a stand-in for the total range of enlightenment characteristics is further strengthened by the next stage mentioned by the Mingun Jetavana, that of *sukkha-vipassaka*, or “one who has dry insight.” The concept of the *sukkha-vipassaka* is not found in the Tipiṭaka (Arbel 2017, 174), but the basis for the later development of this theory comes from utterances like those from the *Kīṭāgiri sutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*, where the Buddha explains that there are seven kinds of persons in the world, foremost among them, those who are *ubhatobhāgavavimutto* (“liberated in part by both ways”) and those who are

³²⁰ According to the *Sāratthappakāsinī*, the *aṭṭhakathā* on the *Samyuttanikāya* (*The Connected Discourses*), this period of attainment which includes the *paṭisambhidās* is said to last only the first twenty years after the Buddha’s first enlightenment (Endo 2013, 136).

paññāvimutto (“liberated by wisdom”) (M I 477,²³). In explaining the difference between these two types of people, the Buddha says that one who is *ubhatobhāgavimutto* means an *arahant* “who resides beyond form in liberations (*vimokhā*) which are peaceful and which are incorporeal, having touched [them] with the body.”³²¹ One who is *paññāvimutto* is an *arahant* who has not touched such liberations with the body, but one for who the “[karmic] outflows are exhausted on account of having seen with wisdom.”³²² What exactly this rather cryptic phrase means has been the source of considerable debate, but the standard definition, not made explicit in the Nikāyas but elaborated in the *aṭṭhakathās*, *ṭīkās*, and so on, is that the first type refers to one who has reached the *jhānas* through *samatha* meditation, while the second kind of person, one liberated by wisdom, has not achieved the *jhānic* states. From these later elaborations come the concept of *sukkhā-vipassaka*, which has the sense of someone engaged in “meditation practices aimed entirely at the cultivation of insight, without the ‘moisture’ of experiencing the joy and happiness of concentrative absorption,” i.e. someone who practices “pure” *vipassanā* without attaining any of the *jhānas* (Anālayo 2022, 178). According to Anālayo, the contemporary emphasis on *sukkhā-vipassaka* can be traced to the modern Burmese reform movement of *vipassanā*, to the Mahasi in particular (Anālayo 2022, 178), and we may by extension include the Mingun Jetavana. By thus linking the second stage of *sāsana* extension to *sukkhā-vipassaka* in the above schema, the Mingun Jetavana again seems to be foreclosing on the possibility of achieving the *abhiññās* after the first 1000 years of the *sāsana*, since for him,

³²¹ *te santā vimokhā atikkamma rūpe āruppā te kāyena phassivā viharati* (M I 477,²⁶⁻²⁷)

³²² *paññāya c’ assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā honti* (M I 477,³⁵⁻³⁶)

sukkha-vipassaka does not involve developing the *jhānic* states.³²³ The problem, therefore, is that on the one hand, the Mingun Jetavana is arguing early on in his commentary in the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa* that the *abhiññās* are still possible to acquire in the present age (or at least the *iddhividhāñāṇa* and the *pubbenivāsañāṇa*), while much later in the text, in his explication of the *Meṇḍakapañhā*, he provides a schema of *sāsana* protraction that seems to preclude the possibility of the *abhiññās* this far into the decay of the *sāsana*'s 5000-year duration.

A possible explanation of this discrepancy is found in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, in a passage that describes the decay of the *sāsana* between the end of the period of *adhigama* and the period of *sīla*, or “moral conduct.” In this passage, it is written that “starting from the last one to attain the truth up to the last one to break the[ir] *sīla*, the *sāsana* is said to be in retreat (*osakkati*).”³²⁴ As Endo also points out (2013, 138), the key word here is the verb “*osakkati*,” which means “draws back (from), retreats; recedes; diminishes; slackens” (Cone, s.v. *osakkita*). While subtle, the difference between this word and “*antaradhāna*” is crucial to recognize, since the latter has more of a definitive sense of disappearance, “vanishing,” and irrecoverable loss (Cone, s.v. *antaradhāyati*). Hence in the formulation seen here in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, it is not as though each stage stipulated in the schema of *sāsana* decline is an absolute threshold, but rather, the

³²³ The Mingun Jetavana's placement of *sukkha-vipassaka* in the second spot of his *sāsana* prolongation schema is further complicated by the fact that the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* has a similar schema that lists the disappearance of the *paṭisambhidās* as occurring after the first 1000 years, followed by the six *abhiññās*, the *tevijjas*, then the *sukkha-vipassakas*, and finally ending with the loss of the *pātimokkha* (Sv III 899,²⁰⁻²³). It seems that this schema would better fit the Mingun Jetavana's purpose, since the *tevijjas* would still be possible in his age, meaning the *pubbenivāsañāṇa* with which he started his polemic.

³²⁴ *pacchimakassa pana sacca-paṭivedhato pacchimakassa sīla-bhedato paṭṭhāya sāsanaṃ osakkitaṃ nāma hoti* (Sv III 899,²³⁻²⁵). My translation is an adaptation of Endo (2013, 138), who mistakenly lists “*osakkati*” as “*osakkhati*.”

attainments of earlier periods are still available in subsequent periods, if only less accessible.³²⁵

We also see this same kind of nuance repeated in the Mingun Jetavana’s biography, in which

Tikkhacara presents yet another model for the history of the *sāsana*. He writes that

Our Buddha’s Holy Order, which is believed to last for five millennia, is supposed to witness five opportune eras with one thousand years each: opportune for liberation (vimutti-yuga), opportune for concentration (samādhi-yuga), opportune for virtuous conducts (sīla-yuga), opportune for scriptural knowledge (suta-yuga), and opportune for the act of generosity (dāna-yuga). Vipassanā practice is normally very popular during the first opportune era (vimutti-yuga), but gradually less and less popular during the remaining four eras, even though it does not fade away totally. (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 44)

In this model, the decline of the *sāsana* is also not presented in terms of the *antaradhānas*, but rather, as five successive “opportune eras,” or *yugas*, each lasting 1000 years. Indeed, the order and titles of each age are the same as that found in the *Paramatthadīpanī*, the *aṭṭhakathā* on the *Theragāthā* (*Verses of the Elders*) (Endo 2013, 136–37).³²⁶ Note that according to Tikkhacara, while a certain stage has ended in the above model (or is yet to begin), that does not mean that the attainments characteristic of earlier *yugas* are completely foreclosed upon, just “less and less popular.” The point being made by Tikkhacara here, following the lead of the *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* passage above, is also subtle but important: the pursuit of *vipassanā* is facilitated during the first “opportune era,” but even during subsequent *yugas*, such as the *sīla-yugaṃ* corresponding to the twentieth century, it is still possible to undertake and succeed in its practice. To this effect, Tikkhacara goes on to write that: “Now, the opportune era for *vipassanā* can be considered to

³²⁵ In the *Sumaṅgalavilāsini*, however, the *sāsana* is termed *antarahitaṃ* “when the relics of the Buddha have completely disappeared,” which is a more conclusive loss than earlier periods (Endo 2013, 138). As a result of these different schemes and their nuances, other commentaries, such as the *Manorathapūraṇī*, “encountered some difficulty in determining which period should be regarded as the cutting-off point for the disappearance” of the *sāsana*, “compelling the *Aṅguttara-bhāṇakā*,” for instance, “to keep silent on the issue” (Endo 2013, 138).

³²⁶ *sāsanassa hi pañca yugāni: vimutti-yugaṃ, samādhi-yugaṃ, sīla-yugaṃ, suta-yugaṃ, dāna-yugaṃ ti* (Th-a III 89,²⁴⁻²⁶).

dawn again. So, more and more people became interested in vipassanā practice. The holy teachings based on what the Buddha himself discovered and revealed (*sāmukkaṃsika-desanā*) are still available” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 44–45). Here is evidence that like the communities of practice linked to U Ba Khin, the Mingun Jetavana’s followers too believed in the theory of the *vimutti khet* mentioned above.³²⁷ From our reading of the first chapter of his commentary, the Mingun Jetavana understood that the *vimutti khet* extended to the *jhānas* and thus to the *abhiññās*, that they too are less pronounced at present (are *osakkati*, “withdrawn” or “in recession”) but still not completely vanished.

To end his own discussion on the decline of the *sāsana*, Tikkhacara adopts his teacher’s confrontational style as seen in the Mil-a and makes a veiled charge against potential critics of his view: “In this case, one should be very careful not to make wild accusations for which one has to pay a heavy price” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 45). Perhaps, then, the discrepancy between the two different models presented in the Mil-a should not be understood as a contradiction, but rather as a flexible strategy of non-committal whereby no one scheme of *sāsana* decline or prolongation is predominant, thereby leaving open many overlapping possibilities without precluding any one interpretation. Indeed, as we have seen, the *aṭṭhakathās*, which the Mingun Jetavana took as authoritative sources second only to the Tipiṭaka, also do not present one single schema of *sāsana* decline and the reasons for its continuation, instead developing their theories in diffuse directions aimed at serving aggregate functions. The Mingun Jetavana is thus nuanced in his approach to narrating the history and future of the *sāsana*, not

³²⁷ Indeed, the 1957 biography mentions the *vimutti yugaṃ* by name multiple times in reference to the Mingun Jetavana’s promotion of *vipassanā* and frequently alludes to this concept, making it an underlying theme of the larger mission of the Mingun Jetavana’s life (see Bio trsl. Hla Myint Tikkhācāra [1957] 2019, 28; 32; 44).

taking each period solely in terms of *antaradhānas*, but rather, as *yugas* where *abhiññās* like the *iddhividhāñāṇa* and the *pubbenivāsañāṇa* are still within reach. Such an approach, motivated by the Mingun Jetavana's commitment to the modern, reform movement of *vipassanā*, reinforces the fluid nature of “*sāsana*” not as a static or fixed category, but as “a vessel for a variety of aspirations, priorities, and innovations” unique to each historical moment (Turner 2014, 143).

Conclusion

We have in this chapter brought into focus the presence and play of the *abhiññās* in both the practice lineage of the Mingun Jetavana but also in the lineage of the *aṭṭhakathā ācariyas*. The concept of the lineage as a analytical lens is productive because in the Burmese context, there is a generative “fuzziness” when it comes to demarcating the history of a single individual and the history of the *sāsana* in general (Houtman 1997, 312). This fuzziness means that the history of the *sāsana* often collapses into and is reflected by the life of an individual, which we see in both the cases of the Thilone and Pannasara, the former being at the root of several of the Mindon sects and acknowledged by some as one of the earliest examples of the living *arahant* concept, and the latter as an integral figure in the early planning of the Sixth Council. This encapsulation of the life of the *sāsana* in the biography of a monastic figure imbues the lack or presence of the *abhiññās* with a significance well beyond the soteriological attainments of a given individual. Instead, the *abhiññās* become a type of fantastic index of the vitality of the Buddha's teachings in a given historical moment, used to ascertain the position of that moment relative to the larger unfolding of the *sāsana*. The *abhiññās* also serve to embody and perhaps assuage anxieties about the decline of the *sāsana* that have existed from the beginning of the institutionalization of the Tipiṭaka until the present day. As evidenced by the proliferation of different discourses on

sāsana decline and their circulation in premodern, early modern, and twentieth-century Burma, the concept of the *sāsana* is an active and variable category debated and dissected not just in monastic and scholastic circles, but by a broader public trying to make sense of the social and political changes around them. As such, this category has been renewed countless times as a site for reformists to revise history, present their agendas, and prognosticate about the future, with the *abhiññās* serving as a pivotal and decisive role in this process.

With this atmosphere of anxiety about the decline of the *sāsana* in the early twentieth century, it is no surprise then that the Mingun Jetavana begins his *Mil-a* with a polemic against those “ignorant ones” who dismiss the possibility of achieving the *abhiññās* in his own age, a pessimistic dismissal which in turn serves to curtail the vitality of the *sāsana* as a whole. The induction of his commentary through the rubric of the *abhiññās* is crucial for the Mingun Jetavana because of his belief in the concept of the *vimutti khet* and his *paṭipatti*-centric view of *sāsana* history. Yet this initiation also signals the fact that for him, the *abhiññās* are the animating force for his *Mil-a*, forming the substratum that connects the Mingun Jetavana as commentator to the omniscience of the Buddha, or rather, the force that perfumes the present with the Buddha’s knowledge of the future. In this way, the *abhiññās* and the continued *sāsana* vitality they represent legitimize the Mingun Jetavana’s role as commentator and as we will see in the following chapter, function as the epistemology of the Pali commentarial project itself manifest in the *Mil-a*.

7 Actualizing the Omniscience of the Buddha: The *Anāgatamaṃsa-ñāṇa* and the Epistemology of the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*

Introduction

The aim of the last three chapters was to flesh out the historical ethos that motivated the Mingun Jetavana when writing his Mil-a in the first half of the twentieth century. This ethos involved first and foremost the Mingun Jetavana's role as a foundational figure in the modern reform movement of *vipassanā* in Burma, but also included his contested and negotiated status as a living *arahant* as this concept gained greater currency in the course of the last century, along with the ways the *abhiññās* figured in his own lineage and in society-wide discourses about *sāsana* longevity and vitality. The purpose of Part II was thus to introduce the multiple threads that both motivated the Mingun Jetavana's composition of the Mil-a and shaped the broader reaction to it. Part III is an attempt to actually weave these seemingly disparate threads together. My aim is to distill what was at stake in this commentary and its public reception, not just for the Mingun Jetavana and the praxis-based communities he created, but for the socio-politics of Burmese Buddhism more broadly. These stakes had direct ramifications for the role of Pali scholasticism in the twentieth century, the changing soteriological horizons for women, and the Buddhist biopolitics of the U Nu administration. Just as in the last chapter, the *abhiññās* are at the centre of what follows, because they are in many ways what hold the Mingun Jetavana's text together and give it such force in the public realm. Hence the purpose of this immediate chapter is to demonstrate how fundamental they are to the Mil-a. By examining the operative role of the *abhiññās* in the first chapter of his commentary, the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa* (*Chapter on Previous Connections*), I will elucidate how the Mingun Jetavana was deploying the *abhiññās* to

reorientate himself and his commentary to time and physical space, creating a new model and mode of history in the process. This model and mode of history is crucial to the Mingun Jetavana's calls to reintroduce the *upasampadā* for women, the topic of the next chapter, because to assess what his argument is and how he makes it, we must understand his broader vision for the future of *sāsana* vitality. The *abhiññās* are reflective of this vision, not least because they encapsulate the Buddha's omniscience, bursting into and shaping the twentieth century through the Mil and the interpretive methods "secretly" embedded therein. Hence in this chapter, it is demonstrated how fundamental the *abhiññās* are to the epistemology of the Mil-a, connecting the Mingun Jetavana with the intentions of the Buddha and collapsing the very distinction between the past and future into his present.

To layout the epistemology in the Mil-a, the first section sets up a juxtaposition with two other examples of the reception of the Mil in Southeast Asia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, where the *abhiññās* are either dismissed as fables or ignored in favour of a more demythologized reading of the text. These two case studies serve as a point of contrast for the Mingun Jetavana's almost obsessive focus on the *abhiññās* in the first chapter of his commentary, the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa*. In the second section, I outline the different ways the *abhiññās* can be ordered and enumerated in Buddhist literature and show how the Mingun Jetavana expanded the standard list of six to seven, with the addition of the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa* ("knowledge of the future"). This addition, with its basis in an enumeration of the *abhiññās* from the Abhidhammapiṭaka, becomes crucial in his argument for the reintroduction of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, the focus of Chapter Eight. The next section takes up the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* ("knowledge of the divine eye"), the most fundamental *abhiññā* that makes possible the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa* so integral to the epistemology of the Mil-a. The point of this section is not

only to show the primacy of the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa*, but to affirm how the *abhiññās* as a whole represent the omniscience of the Buddha in the Mil, captured by the metaphor of the *samanta-cakkhu* (“all-around eye”) so characteristic of the enlightenment experience of a buddha. One of the consequences of taking the *abhiññās* as stand-ins for the Buddha’s omniscience is that they allow the Mingun Jetavana to reconceptualize physical space in his commentary. This reconceptualization was effected in his treatment of the *kasiṇas* and the *iddhividha-ñāṇa*, which allows those in possession of this *abhiññā* to cover vast distances in an instant. For the Mingun Jetavana, he uses the *iddhividha-ñāṇa* to connect his text with the sacred geography of “Buddhist South Asia” and thereby expand the scope and range of his Mil-a and the vision of *sāsana* history which it develops.

In the same way that the *abhiññās* alter the Mingun Jetavana’s treatment of space, they permit him a new way to approach time. It is through his discussion of the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa* (“knowledge of past lives”), the focus of section five, that the Mingun Jetavana reconceptualizes the role of time in his commentary, one in which the flow of time is no barrier to the Buddha. This realization opens up a new paradigm of history for the Mingun Jetavana to leverage in his commentary, which he does by invoking the concept of the *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ naya* (“methods handed down to future monks”).³²⁸ I argue in the eponymous section that this concept formulated by the Mingun Jetavana is not just a projection by the commentator onto the root text, but his response to the esoteric quality of the Mil, especially in the *Meṇḍakapañha*, over which

³²⁸ In his introduction to the Mil-a, Deshpande translates *naya* as doctrines (Deshpande 1999, 7). While this rendering gets at the way the Mingun Jetavana is using this concept, *naya* is perhaps more accurately translated as “method,” or even, “methods of interpretation” (Cone, s.v. *naya*), which captures the fact that the Mingun Jetavana is using this concept to adjudicate between apparently contradictory statements made by the Buddha, as a hermeneutic tool to decide how best to proceed in the present based on the Buddha’s intention in the past.

most of the controversy of his text revolves. The final section explores how the Mingun Jetavana’s focus on the *abhiññās* in his Mil-a should not simply be dismissed as evidence of his attachment to premodern Buddhist ideas or as blind faith in the root text, but can be productively framed as “commentarial techniques,” following Laurie Patton. Such commentarial techniques are partly about expanding and extrapolating on the Buddha’s omniscience, as Heim has argued, but while this insight is helpful to understanding the works attributed to Buddhaghosa as a literary project, I assert that in the case of the Mil-a, something subtly different but profoundly distinct is going on, where the Mingun Jetavana uses the *abhiññās* to re-instantiate and actualize the Buddha’s omniscience in the present. In this act of reprisal, the omniscience as represented by the *abhiññās*, and especially in the form of the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa*, are best seen as a dynamic, living force that can be accessed and wielded by both practitioners and commentators to ensure the continued vitality of the *sāsana* well into the future. Indeed, this wielding is exactly what is seen in the Mingun Jetavana’s calls to reinstate the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, the focus of the next chapter, where the new model and means of *sāsana* history provided by the *abhiññās* is triggered, (re-)actuating the Buddha’s omniscience in the present.

7.1 The *Pubbayogakaṇḍa* in Context

After the introductory sections of his commentary, the Mingun Jetavana labels the first chapter of his exegesis the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa*, which starts on page seven and continues till page seventy-two. In Trenckner’s edition of the Mil, this first chapter is known as the *Bāhirakathā* (“framing story”). Skilling notes about this chapter that the “consensus of scholarship is that these opening sections correspond to the original text, which was brought to Ceylon and translated into Pāli by about the beginning of the Common Era (with the *proviso* that much of the narrative material in

the *bāhirakathā* was composed in Ceylon)” (Skilling 1998, 93). As discussed at the end of the last chapter, the “narrative material” in the *Bāhirakathā/Pubbayogakaṇḍa* involves brief and fleeting incidents of the *abhiññās*, which despite their brevity, function as a sort of *deus ex machina* to move the narrative along and make possible the meeting of Nāgasena and Milinda in debate. Except in the world of Pali literature, these instances of the *abhiññās* are not unexpected and unlikely but are natural features of the soteriological landscape of the *saṅgha* five centuries after the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*. The display of the *abhiññās* would have thus been an extraordinary if not routine literary device at the time the *Bāhirakathā* was composed in what we know call “Sri Lanka” (around the first century C.E.) and would not have been seen as desperate plot devices by its author(s) or early readership. In contrast, the *abhiññās* are hardly commented on in scholarship on the Mil, or if they are mentioned, are framed in a negative light. As we saw at the end of the last chapter, Horner downplayed the role of the *abhiññās* in the *Bāhirakathā*. This minimizing of the role of the *abhiññās* in the Mil is part of a century-long trend in scholarship, where the focus has been on debating the possible Greek background of the text (see Demiéville 1924; Tarn 1938; Gonda 1949; Fussman 1993; Vasil’kov 1993; Sick 2007; Baums 2018), a comparison of the Chinese and Pali versions (Thich Minh Chau 1964; Watsuji 1977; Levman 2021), on the different recension histories of the text in Chinese and Pali (see Lévi and Specht 1893; Takakusu 1896; Demiéville 1924; Mizuno 1959; Guang Xing 2009; Skilling 2010; Anālayo 2021; Eng Jin Ooi 2021; 2022), and as an object of and tool in philosophical analysis (e.g. karma: Sasaki 1956; McDermott 1977; Main 2007; e.g. non-self: Yoshida 1977; Vallicella 2006; Jones 2020; e.g. logic: Schumann 2019; gen.: Basu 1978; Kachru 2022). In almost all of these instances of research where the Mil plays a central role, the *abhiññās* are barely mentioned,

if at all. This is not to critique this body of research, and indeed, the *abhiññās* only form a minor part of the text itself, relegated mostly to the *Bāhirakathā*.

They were, however, noticed by some of the earliest Europeans reading and thinking about the Mil. In one telling case from nineteenth-century Thailand, the Mil became a topic of debate in elite circles, at least between the Siamese Foreign Minister under King Mongkut (r. 1851-1868) and European visitors to his court. Craig Reynolds points to one such conversation in 1863 where the Siamese Foreign Minister, Kham Bunnag (1813-1870 (Trakulhun 2017, 63)),³²⁹ was asked by his German and British visitors about the “authenticity of parts of the Pāli canon” (Reynolds 1976, 213). These conversations, according to Sven Trakulhun, were coming at a time of “increasingly harsh” debates between educated Siamese Buddhists and Christian Missionaries in Siam, debates which spurred an effort to reform Buddhism amongst these educated elites themselves (Trakulhun 2017, 66). Highlighting the critical role of the Mil in this colonial encounter between Buddhism and Europe, Adolf Bastian from Germany “questionna ensuite son hôte sur le temps du roi Milinda, au nom duquel se rattache un livre célèbre” (Feer 1877, 152). The fact that Bastian referenced the Mil as early as 1863, which Léon Feer, Reynold’s source for this conversation, calls “un livre célèbre,” demonstrates the currency this text had in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, even before it was fully translated into any European language. Feer continues that “au sujet de Nāgasena, [...] dont le souvenir est entouré de merveilleux,” Kham Bunnag “trouva dans un de ses livres que ce personnage était descend du ciel de Brahma” (Feer 1877, 152). Indeed, in the root text it is said that after being beseeched several times to debate Milinda by Sakka, the king of the gods, and then by the head monk of the

³²⁹ Kham Bunnag was also known by his official title, “Chaophaya Thipakorawong” (Trakulhun 2017, 63).

saṅgha, Assagutta, who was leading a contingent of millions of *arahant*s (*koṭṭisatā arahanto*) to the Himalayas, Nāgasena, then known as “Mahāsenā the god[, was] overjoyed and delighted in heart at the thought that he would be able to help the faith by refuting the heresy of Milinda; and he gave them his word, and said: ‘Very well then, venerable ones, I consent to be reborn in the world of men’” (Mil trans. Rhys Davids 1890b, I:13) (Mil 7,²⁰⁻²⁴). Mahāsenā (i.e., Nāgasena) then “descended from the Brahmā heaven” and began training as a novice with the intent to meet Milinda and defeat him in debate.

The response of Kham Bunnag to the questions of his visitors is quite revealing on how educated Siamese elites understood the role of the *abhiññās* in their efforts to reform Buddhism. After considering the incredulity of this episode concerning Mahāsenā, which aptly demonstrates the “merveilleux” surrounding the life of Nāgasena, the skeptical Thai minister remarks that “c’est la une fable, qui signifie seulement que tous les hommes ont les brahmanes pour ancêtres” (Feer 1877, 152). In other words, as a “fable,” the Mil should not be taken literally on this point but interpreted figuratively as a myth about the brahmin ancestry of all humans, which might be better accommodated in the worldview of the foreign visitors at court. It is not clear what exactly was at issue here, whether it was the possibility of premeditated rebirth, the ability of human monks to communicate with a deva and travel to the heavenly realms, or the existence of the heavenly realms themselves, but the *abhiññās* were an important part of the “wonderous” machinery of the Mil being questioned. In later writings, Kham Bunnag “frames karma and rebirth as rational” and scientific (Winichakul 2015, 79), using the supposedly “scientific” logic of karma to argue that “heaven and hell must exist as destinations for the consequences of good and bad deeds” (Reynolds 1976, 217). Yet Kham Bunnag’s skepticism about events in the Mil and the reality of the *abhiññās* presages later interventions by the same minister in reinterpreting

Theravada conceptions of the world systems as found in the seminal text of Thai cosmography, the *Traibhūmi Braḥ R'vaṅ* (*The Three World [Systems] of Phra Raung*), the axioms of which were then being “shaken by [competing] explanations offered by Western science” (Reynolds 1976, 214). In a similar way to how he reinterpreted the Mil as “fable,” Kham Bunnag published a critique of the *Traibhūmi Braḥ R'vaṅ* in 1867 called the *Nangsue sadaeng kitchanukit*.³³⁰ He dedicates the first third of this book to a denouncement of “Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, which was found at the basis of several ideas regarding the natural world at the time” (Winichakul 2015, 79).³³¹ Kham Bunnag’s approach was to recast natural phenomena such as rain, earthquakes, and disease not as the result of divine fiat, but as stemming from “environmental [factors] devoid of moral content” (Reynolds 1976, 215). In contrast, the true value of texts like the Mil and the *Traibhūmi Braḥ R'vaṅ* for the minister “was not so much philosophy and theology as social ethics” (Reynolds 1976, 215). Part of Kham Bunnag’s strategy here in “respond[ing] to the challenged posed by Western knowledge” was to effectively “separate the material world from the spiritual” (Trakulhun 2017, 65). Hence the “merveilleux” aspects of the Mil, especially the instances of the *abhiññās* in its narrative opening, were rejected by a modernizing Siamese minister part of efforts to reform Theravada Buddhism in the face of an

³³⁰ Streicher explains that this text was “the first book in Thai that was written and printed by a Siamese, and was widely read and celebrated in a number of Western countries, including England and Germany, in a version translated and published by Henry Alabaster under the title *The modern Buddhist* in 1870” (Streicher 2021, 17). Indeed, Kham Bunnag has to assemble the press on which he printed this text himself, since the Christian “missionaries had refused the use of their presses on the grounds that the Kitchanukit contained negative remarks on Christianity” (Streicher 2021, 17).

³³¹ According to Thongchai Winichakul, Kham Bunnag turns in the rest of the book “to those issues concerning spirituality and teachings of various religions in response to critiques of Buddhism by a number of Christian missionaries, including Bishop Pallegoix, Reverend John Taylor Jones, Dr. Dan Bradley, and others. Here, the author stands firmly behind Buddhist teachings on almost every issue, arguing for the superiority of Buddhism over Christianity in the realm of spirituality (Winichakul 2015, 79).

encroaching, rationalist, and militarily-threatening worldview.³³² Indeed, Ruth Streicher describes how Kham Bunnag, in his role as foreign minister, “negotiated a number of unequal treaties” with colonial powers, treaties that formed the context for the kinds of conversation between the minister and his European guests (Streicher 2021, 16). In this context where the Siamese were struggling to maintain their sovereignty over both the material and spiritual realm, the *abhiññās* should be understood as mere fables, magical stories that ought not be interpreted literally by a discerning, modern audience.

A similar rationalist interpretation of the Mil is seen in colonial Burma by the monk, Adiccavamsa. As discussed in Chapter Two, he is perhaps best known today for having published a *Milinda-nissaya* in 1916 around the age of 34 and with 14 years in the monkhood (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 61). According to his Burmese biography, in the late 1910s, a few years before publishing his *Milinda-nissaya*, Adiccavamsa “quite liked the *Milindapañha*. He was also encouraged. [For he] also [wanted] to emulate it, [as] the *Milindapañha* is perfect by all accounts”³³³ (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 52–53). In his biography, it is claimed that “at the time” of the composition of the Mil, “the Greek *abhidhammas* were entering into the country of India”

³³² Khammai Dhammasāmi lists 28 texts as identified sources of the *Traibhūmi Braḥ R'vañ*, the 14th of which is the Mil (Dhammasāmi 2004, 171).

³³³ ဆရာတော် အရှင်အာဒိစ္စဝံသမှာ ထိုအချိန်က မိလိန္ဒပဉ္စကျမ်း (Page 53) ကို အတော်သဘောကျခဲ့သည်။ အားလည်းကျခဲ့သည်။ အားကျလောက်အောင်လည်း မိလိန္ဒပဉ္စကျမ်းသည် ... အဘက်ဘက်က ပြည့်စုံကောင်းမွန်သော ကျမ်းဖြစ်သည်။ (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 52–53)

³³⁴ (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 53). The nature of these “Greek *abhidhammas*” is further explained when it is stated that

in terms of the questions that King Milinda submitted [to Nāgasena], rather than simply being just lofty, [they] are ideas with logical thinking and novelties, consisting of [many] innovations. If one also looks at the answers of Ashin Nāgasena, they too are ideas that penetrate not just the ideas of the Greek *abhidhamma*, [but] are also teeming with [many] innovations.³³⁵ (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 53)

Hence the ‘Greek *abhidhammas*’ that apparently pervade the Mil are said to be characterised by their logical thinking and novelty, innovative insofar as they have entered this text not only from outside Buddhism, but from outside the South Asian subcontinent. Perhaps Adiccavamsa was reacting to the many doctrines and concepts of the text not found in or even contradictory to Theravada orthodoxy, or perhaps he was aware of the trends in contemporaneous European scholarship focused on the Greek influence and possible origins of the text, but it is made clear in the biography that the “new perspectives” found in the Mil “were resolved and assimilated in order to be exactly like the truth of the Buddh[ist] *abhidhamma*”³³⁶ (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 53). As a result of the unique nature of this text and its harmony with Buddhist doctrine, “Sayadaw Ashin Adiccavamsa cast acquisitive eyes on the ideas of the Greek *abhidhamma* in the *Milindapañha*, being penetrated [by] ideas with logical thinking and novelties, and [wanted to]

³³⁴ ထိုအချိန်က အိန္ဒိယနိုင်ငံသို့ ... ဂရိတ်အဘိဓမ္မာများပါ ဝင်ရောက်နေပြီးချိန် ဖြစ်သည်။ (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 53)

³³⁵ မိလိန္ဒမင်းကြီး တင်ပြလျှောက်ထားသည့် ပြဿနာရပ်များမှာ ရိုးရိုး မြင့်မားနေရုံသာမဟုတ်ဘဲ တက္ကဗေဒဆန်ဆန် အတွေးအခေါ်တို့ဖြင့် ဆန်းသစ်မှုများ၊ တီထွင်မှုများပါ ပါဝင်နေသည်။ အရှင်နာဂသေန၏ အဖြေများကို ကြည့်လျှင်လည်း ဂရိတ်အဘိဓမ္မာ၏ အတွေးအခေါ်များ စူးဝင်နေရုံမက ဆန်းသစ်မှုများ၊ တီထွင်မှုများဖြင့်လည်း ပြည့်နှက်နေပေသေးသည်။ (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 53)

³³⁶ မိလိန္ဒမင်းကြီး၏ တက္ကဗေဒဆန်ဆန် မေးခွန်းများကို အရှင်နာဂသေနက ဂရိတ်အဘိဓမ္မာ၏ အတွေးသစ်၊ အမြင်သစ်များကို ဗုဒ္ဓအဘိဓမ္မာမှ သစ္စာနည်းဖြင့် အံဝင်ခွင်ကျဖြစ်အောင် ကျေကျေညက်ညက် ဖြေရှင်းထားပေသည်။ (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 53)

emulate [this text]. He believe[d] it would be possible for him to compile a treatise of this kind by himself with such ideas”³³⁷ (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 54).

To this end, Adiccavamsa came to live in Upper Burma in the monastery of Manle Sayadaw (မန်လည်ဆရာတော် *Man laññ cha rā tau*, 1842-1921 (Aye Win 2015, 11); hereafter the Manle). At this time (around 1909 or 1910), the Manle was one of the most respected and high profile monks in Burma, especially after the publication of his *Maghadevalaṅkā* (မဃဒေဝလင်္ကာ *Composition on Maghadeva*) in *yadu* (ရတု *ra tu*) verse sometime around 1900 (Aye Win 2015, 5). Taking for its basis the story of King Maghadeva (a.k.a. ‘Makhādeva’), who was said to be “in the direct line of Mahāsammata,” the primordial king, and thus an ancestor of the Sākiyans of Gotama Buddha (Malalasekera [1937] 1974, 400), the *Maghadevalaṅkā* is not limited to purely religious matters, but is a masterpiece in 625 stanzas of “history, military science, administration, social relations, medicine, alchemy, *Porāṇa* and *Vohāra*, in addition to Myanmar Grammar and *Orthography* of Myanmar Synonyms” (Aye Win 2015, 73). This text thus amply demonstrates the Manle’s profound erudition and interest in topics outside Buddhism. In addition to the *Maghadevalaṅkā*, the Manle was also well-known for publishing a series of question and answer texts throughout his life that were eventually compiled in an anthology of nine volumes called *Paññāvīmaṃsanakathā* (ပညာဝိမံသနကထာ *A Discourse on the Investigation of Wisdom*) (Aye Win 2015, 43). This anthology consists of exchanges that the Manle had carried out in print with figures like the Ledi and the Mingun Jetavana’s own teacher, the Aletawya, as well as with

³³⁷ မိလိန္ဒပဉ္စကျမ်းတွင် ... ဂရိတ်အဘိဓမ္မာ၏ အတွေးအခေါ်များ၊ စူးဝင်နေမှု တက္ကဗေဒဆန်ဆန် အတွေးအခေါ်တို့ဖြင့် ဆန်းသစ်မှုများကို ဆရာတော် အရှင်အာဒိစ္စဝံသသည် မျက်စိကျနေခဲ့သည်၊ အားကျနေခဲ့သည်။ ဤလိုအတွေးအခေါ်တို့ဖြင့် ဤလိုကျမ်းမျိုးကို ၎င်းကိုယ်တိုင် ပြုစုရေးသားပါက ဖြစ်နိုင်လိမ့်မည်ဟုလည်း ယုံကြည်နေသည်။ (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 54)

government officials and lay scholars. The Manle also wrote numerous judgement texts (P. *vinicchaya*) concerning questions over proper practice and doctrinal interpretation. In one such famous instance, the Manle resolved a dispute over whether it is proper to drill into a pagoda wall in order to install electrical lights, concluding that there was no contravention in so doing (Aye Win 2015, 15). Hence the Manle, like Kham Bunnag, can be seen as someone trying to reconcile the tenets and norms of Theravada Buddhism with the new epistemologies and technologies of colonial modernity.

It is for these reasons, the Manle’s immense learning, penchant for the question and answer genre, and his willingness to accommodate Theravada Buddhism to new technologies and ideas, that Adiccavamsa composed “300 high-level problems” for him and requested the Manle answer them in writing (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 55).³³⁸ According to his biography, Adiccavamsa’s “came to live with the Manle” and offered these 300 questions “in order to compile a treatise with new perspectives that must be reasonable and acceptable to the world and also be beneficial for the *sāsana*, [meant to be] titled the ‘*Ādiccavaṃsapañhā*’ just as the *Milindapañha*”³³⁹ (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 54). As the senior monk did not know the reasons for Adiccavamsa’s questions, and as the junior monk only had eight years of ordination at this point, the Manle did not respond (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 55). While the exact contents of these 300 questions is not known to me, given Adiccavamsa’s interest in perspectives outside of

³³⁸ မြင့်မားလှသော ပုစ္ဆာပေါင်း ၃၀၀ ကျော်ကို (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 55).

³³⁹ မိလိန္ဒပဉ္စကျမ်းကဲ့သို့ “အာဒိစ္စဝံသပဉ္စ” အမည်ဖြင့် သာသနာ၌လည်း အကျိုးများ၊ ကမ္ဘာကလည်း လေးစားလက်ခံရမည့် အတွေးသစ်၊ အမြင်သစ်တို့ဖြင့် ကျမ်းတစ်ကျမ်းကို ပြုစုရန် မာန်လည်ဆရာတော် ဘုရားကြီးထံ ဝင်ရောက်နေထိုင်လာခြင်းဖြစ်ကြောင်းဖြင့် (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 54)

Buddhism and his assertion that “the world also [has] new ideas [which] should be respected,” it is possible that he intended to compose the *Ādiccavaṃsapāñhā* to reform or critique the doctrines of Theravada Buddhism, similar to how the Manle entertained the question of whether electrical lights should be installed in a pagoda entertained. In this approach to the Mil, like that of Kham Bunnag above, the role of the *abhiññās* are not foregrounded in the text, or dismissed outright as reflecting a mythological, irrational relic of Buddhism’s past. It was the “Greek *abhidhamma*” that was of interest to the Adiccavaṃsa, just as it was to his contemporaries in Europe.

The purpose of providing this limited background to how the Mil was received and understood in the middle of the nineteenth and early twentieth century is to offer a point of contrast to the Mil-a. To the Mingun Jetavana, it is clear from the discussion of the last chapter that the marvellous displays of the *abhiññās* in the Mil are not simply flourishes of figurative speech or fabulist fantasies but represent states and abilities accessible through the practice of meditation—even in the twentieth century, not to mention two millennia past when the Mil is set. Indeed, in commenting on the first chapter of the Mil in his *Pubbayogakaṇḍa*, the Mingun Jetavana neglects almost everything else to focus on these relatively minor episodes of the *abhiññās*, dedicating his explication to the *parikamma* for how one achieves these higher forms of knowledge. How, then, are we to make sense of what the Mingun Jetavana is doing in his Mil-a? Why does he not recognize the philosophical aspects and import of the text he is commenting on, and chooses instead to elaborate on the *abhiññās*? To answer this question, we must first explore how he understands the *abhiññās* and the role he sees them playing in the root text.

7.2 Different Schemes of the *Abhiññās*

As we saw at the end of the last chapter, the Mingun Jetavana argues for the possibility of the *abhiññās* at the outset of his commentary, placing them within a larger discourse on *sāsana* decline in Burma at the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. After asserting the possibility of attaining the *abhiññās* in his own time, the Mingun Jetavana enumerates these *abhiññās* as he understands them. Referring to his own age—the age of *sāsana* decline—the Mingun Jetavana writes that those

who obtain the *iddhividhañāṇa* (knowledge of the various supernormal powers) are not many, [those] who obtain the *dibbasota-ñāṇa* (knowledge of the divine ear) are not many, [those] who obtain the *cetopariya-ñāṇa* (knowledge of reading other’s minds) [...], [those] who obtain the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa* (knowledge of past lives) [...], [those] who obtain the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* (knowledge of the divine eye) [...], [those] who obtain the *anāgatamsa-ñāṇa* (knowledge of the future) [...], [those] who obtain the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa* (knowledge of karmic results) are not many, they are only few, [as] person[s] endowed with the *magga* (path) and also endowed with the *phala* (fruit) are only few as well.³⁴⁰

All told there are seven *abhiññās* listed here. This sevenfold enumeration overlaps with but expands on the *chaḷabhiññās*, or “six *abhiññās*” supplied in many authoritative Pali and Sanskrit accounts of the *abhiññās*. For instance, the *locus classicus* of the *chaḷabhiññās* is found in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (*Discourse on the Fruits of the Homeless Life*) of the *Dīghanikāya*, where the Buddha begins with the *iddhividha-ñāṇa*, then the *dibbasota-dhātu* (“sphere of the divine ear”), the *cetopariya-ñāṇa*, the *pubbenivāsānussati-ñāṇa* (“knowledge of recollecting previous lives”), the *sattānaṃ cutūpapāta-ñāṇa* (“knowledge of the falling away and coming into

³⁴⁰ *iddhividhañāṇalābhi pi bahulo na hoti/ dibbasotañāṇalābhi pi bahulo na hoti/ cetopariyañāṇalābhi [...]* *pubbenivāsañāṇalābhi [...]* *dibbacakkhuñāṇalābhi [...]* *anāgatamsañāṇalābhi [...]* *yathākammūpagañāṇalābhi pi bahulo na hoti/appako va hoti/ maggasamaṅgiko pi phalasamaṅgiko pi appako va hoti* (Mil-a 7,⁷⁻¹¹)

existence of beings”),³⁴¹ and the *āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa* (“knowledge of the destruction of the cankers”). Pranke explains that these *chaḷabhiññās* can be understood as an “elaboration” of an earlier scheme seen in the last chapter, the *tevijja* (“three knowledges”), which consists of the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa*, the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa*, and the *āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa* (Pranke 2004a, 8). The standard set of six includes five *lokiya* (“mundane”) *abhiññās*, which adepts outside of Buddhism can likewise achieve, and one *lokuttara* (“supramundane”) power, with direct religious implications exclusive to those on the path to *nibbāna*. Picking up of the *tevijja*, which “form the content of the content of the Buddha’s awakening in early canonical depictions of his enlightenment experience” (Pranke 2004a, 8), a common formula like that seen in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* has the *āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa* as the single *lokuttara abhiññā* of the *chaḷabhiññās*.³⁴² The inclusion of the removal of the unwholesome cankers in the list of six is also found in the Thilone’s biography mentioned in the previous chapter (Thi trans. Hla Myat Thu 2013, 29). In contrast, at least one modern Burmese list of the *chaḷabhiññās* does not

³⁴¹ The phrase in this passage used to describe the karmic “fate” of beings is not “*yathākammūpagā*,” as in the Mil-a, but “*cutūpapāta*,” a compound consisting of “*cuta*,” a past participle of *cavati* meaning having “fallen away,” and “*upapāta*,” meaning “coming into existence, birth” (Cone, s.v. *upapāta*). The sense of these two phrases, however, is the same.

³⁴² I translate the word “*āsava*” as “cankers” because the *kilesas* (“defilements”) continuously ooze unskillful thought, speech and action. The word “canker” or “oozing” captures the fact that the *āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa* is not simply cerebral where one understands or acts in the world in a different way. There is also a corporeal, visceral experience where one sheds through the body the moral impurities and karmic vestiges. I must thank Daniel Stuart for pointing this important aspect of *āsava* out to me, which is also redolent of the concept of *vāsanā* (“perfuming”), or *kleśa-vāsanā* (“perfuming of the defilements”) as found in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* of the Yogācāra school, where it is used in the sense of “traces of defilement” (Mingyuan 2021, 7). Though it is later developed in the *Yogācārabhūmiśāstra* in a more metaphysical direction in regards to *bījas*, or karmic “seeds” accumulated from past lives (see Mingyuan 2021), an idea presaged by the presence of the term “*vāsa*” in “*pubbenivāsañāṇa*,” the force behind this metaphor is that one’s entire being, both mental and physical, are filled with the visceral stench of unwholesome actions, and this notion of “perfuming” is used in Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma as one of the demarcations between an *arahant* and a *samyaksambuddha*, or “fully, completely enlightened one.” The *arahant* may still have lingering traces of the stench of the defilements, even though the *kleśas* themselves have been eradicated, while the *samyaksambuddha* has eliminated both the *kleśas* and any mental or physical residue.

mention the *āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa*, replacing this supramundane power with *yathākammūpaga-abhiññā* (Myat Kyaw and San Lwin 2007, 56), which is what we see in the Mingun Jetavana’s enumeration. Possessing the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa* means that one not only knows their own future destinations according to the karmic actions they have performed and the fruits that will result (i.e., whether they will be reborn as a hungry ghost (P. *peta*), an animal, a human, a divine being, etc.), but one knows the karmic destinations of others as well. As karma is a fundamental principle in the Buddhist worldview, possessing the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa* puts one in possession of a deeper insight into reality—on par with an *arahant* or buddha. In other words, there is a revelatory component to this *abhiññā*, one that imbues it with a *lokuttara*-like quality conducive to progressing on the Buddhist path.

In the *Vism*, the five mundane *abhiññās* (P. *pañcalokikābhiññā*) are listed as beginning with *iddhividha*, then the *dibbasota-dhātu-ñāṇa*, followed by the *cetopariya-ñāṇa* and the *pubbenivāsānussati-ñāṇa*, ending not with the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* as number five, but the *sattānaṃ cutūpapāte ñāṇa* (“knowledge of the falling away and coming into existence of beings”), the same phrase seen in the *Dīghanikāya* passages above to describe *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa* (see *Vism* 373,¹⁵⁻¹⁷). In this list, the *abhiññās* are sequenced according to how they are achieved through the *jhānas*, starting with the fourth *jhāna*, at least according to the *Vism*. Standing in for the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa*, which the *Vism* makes clear in a later enumeration of the *abhiññās* (starting from *Vism* 423,¹¹), the *sattānaṃ cutūpapāte ñāṇa* is last because it is the most difficult to attain. Mizuno explains that the inclusion of the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa/sattānaṃ cutūpapāte ñāṇa* in the standard list of the *chaḷabhiññās* as seen in the *Vism* and the *Mil-a* is a uniquely Theravada innovation, not found in the lists of the Mahayana (Mizuno 2000, 12). Perhaps this innovation is the result of later commentarial efforts to distinguish between the

tevijja and the *chaḷabhiññās*, with the *āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa* being restricted to the domain of the former. The inclusion of the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa* as one of the *abhiññās* could be based in part on a reading of an excerpt from the *Sampasādanīya Sutta* (*Discourse on Serene Faith*) from the *Dīghanikāya*, where it is said that “further, O Bhante, the Fortunate One’s teaching of the *dhamma* according to the knowledge of the falling away and coming into existence of beings is incomparable”³⁴³ (D III 111,¹⁵⁻¹⁶). The same sentiment is also seen in the *Dīghanikāya*’s *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (*Discourse on the Fruits of the Homeless Life*), where it is said that “this one, with a mind thus collected, completely pure, completely clean, free from impurities and defilements, made pliant, fit, and composed, directs and bends their mind to the knowledge of the falling away and coming into existence of beings”³⁴⁴ (D I 82,²²⁻²⁵). Like the example from the *Sampasādanīya Sutta*, the passage in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* goes on to explain that this ability to see the falling away and coming into existence of beings is premised on the *dibbacakkhu*, the “divine eye” which the Mingun Jetavan lists as a separate *abhiññā* in his Mil-a.³⁴⁵ Yet how, exactly, are the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* and the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa* connected in the Theravada understanding of the *abhiññās*?

³⁴³ *aparam pana bhante etad ānuttariyaṃ yathā Bhagavā dhammaṃ deseti sattānaṃ cutūpapāta-ñāṇe* (D III 111,¹⁵⁻¹⁶)

³⁴⁴ *So evaṃ samāhite citte parisuddhe pariyodāte anaṅgaṇe vigatūpakkilese mudu-bhūte kammaniye ṭhite ānejjappatte sattānaṃ cutūpapāta-ñāṇāya cittaṃ abhinīharati abhininnāmeti* (D I 82,²²⁻²⁵)

³⁴⁵ There is also another reference to ability to see the rising and falling of beings according to their karma to begin the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* (*Discourse of the Great Lion’s Roar*) where the Buddha says he sees whether beings are born in in hell or in heaven according to his *dibbacakkhu* (see D I 161,^{18-162,18}).

7.3 *Dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* as the Epitome of Omniscience

To understand how the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa* and the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* are connected in the mind of the Mingun Jetavana, it is helpful to examine a further list of the *abhiññās* found in the last book of the Abhidhammapiṭaka, the *Paṭṭhāna* (*Conditional Relations*). The Mingun Jetavana was no doubt heavily influenced by the Abhidhammapiṭaka in writing his Mil-a, partly because his *vipassanā* method draws heavily from *abhidhamma* philosophy and categories, and indeed, the Abhidhammapiṭaka and its hermeneutical techniques “form[s] the technical basis of the Commentaries” (Ñāṇamoli [1962b] 1977, liv). In this enumeration from the *Paṭṭhāna*, there are seven *abhiññās* listed in such a way that appears to have shaped part of the Mingun Jetavana’s thinking in expanding his own list to seven. The order of these seven *abhiññās* as they are found in the *Paṭṭhāna* is as follows: *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa*, *dibbasota-ñāṇa*, *iddhividha-ñāṇa*, *cetopariya-ñāṇa*, *pubbenivāsānussati-ñāṇa*, *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa*, and *anāgatamṣa-ñāṇa*. The arrangement given here does not match that found in the standard Theravada set of the *chaḷabhiññās* in the Vism, which the Mingun Jetavana more closely follows when he enumerates the *abhiññās*, at least in terms of the order in which they are listed. For instance, the Mingun Jetavana begins in the quote above with the *iddhividha-ñāṇa*, which is considered the first and easiest *abhiññā* to attain. Yet like the enumeration given by the Mingun Jetavana, this list from the *Paṭṭhāna* has all seven of the *abhiññās* mentioned by the Mingun Jetavana, including and especially the *anāgatamṣa-ñāṇa*, or “knowledge of the future,” which the Vism does not treat as a separate *abhiññā*.

It is vital to recognize that the *Paṭṭhāna*’s list of the *abhiññās* occurs in a discussion about one of the 24 causal relation of *abhidhamma* etiological theory, that of strong-dependence (P. *upanissāya*). The *upanissāya* causal relation is described by the Ledi in his *Paṭṭhānuddesa-*

dīpanī as “[a]ll past, present and future, internal and external, classes of consciousness together with their concomitants, all material qualities, Nibbāna and concepts (*paññatti*), are natural sufficing conditions, severally related, as the case may be, to all the present classes of consciousness and their concomitants” (Paṭṭh-d trans. Nyāna 1986, 17). The sense of the *upanissāya* causal relation, according to the Ledi, is that the prior existence of a class is sufficient for the rearing of the same type of class, hence the other name of this causal relation, “sufficing condition.” A second important aspect of the *upanissāya* causal relation as described by the Ledi is its almost teleological pull over time. For example, a future event, like the desire for some kind of spiritual attainment, can act as an *upanissāya* for present actions, even if one has not experienced the attainment before. It is thus according to this *upanissāya* that the order of the *abhiññās* in the following excerpt from the *Paṭṭhāna* is determined:

Divine-eye is related to divine-ear element by strong dependence condition; divine-ear element is related to knowledge of supernormal power by strong-dependence condition; knowledges of supernormal power is related to knowledge of penetration into others' minds by strong-dependence condition; knowledge of penetration into others' minds is related to knowledge of remembrance of past existences by strong dependence condition; knowledge of remembrance of past existences is related to knowledge of rebirths according to one's kamma by strong-dependence condition; knowledge of rebirths according to one's kamma is related to knowledge of future existences by strong-dependence condition³⁴⁶. (Paṭṭh trans. Nārada 1969, I:158)

³⁴⁶The B^e has: *dibbacakkhu dibbāya sotadhātuyā upanissayapaccayena paccayo. dibbasotadhātu iddhividhañāṇassa upanissayapaccayena V.1.168 paccayo. iddhividhañāṇaṃ cetopariyañāṇassa upanissayapaccayena paccayo. cetopariyañāṇaṃ pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇassa upanissayapaccayena paccayo. pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇaṃ yathākammūpagañāṇassa upanissayapaccayena paccayo. yathākammūpagañāṇaṃ anāgatamsañāṇassa upanissayapaccayena paccayo.* Here is the PTS rendering: *Dibbassa cakkhussa parikammaṃ dibbassa cakkhussa. Upanissayapaccayena paccayo. Dibbāya sotadhātuyā parikammaṃ dibbāya sotadhātuyā, iddhividhañāṇassa parikammaṃ iddhividhañāṇassa, cetopariyañāṇassa parikammaṃ cetopariyañāṇassa, pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇassa parikammaṃ pubbenivāsānussatiñāṇassa, yathākammupagañāṇassa parikammaṃ yathākammūpagañāṇassa, anāgatamsañāṇassa parikammaṃ anāgatamsañāṇassa upanissayapaccayena paccayo* (Paṭṭh II 165,³³-166,⁵)

The order of the *abhiññās* just listed is thus etiological and not in the order that they are attained, insofar as one *abhiññā* in the series is the strong-dependence condition (P. *upanissāya-paccaya*) for the next, starting with the *dibbacakkhu* at the base of this causal series.

By starting with *dibbacakkhu*, the *Paṭṭhāna*'s list above is making an important claim about this *abhiññā*, that it is the basis from which all others derive. This is not to say that the *dibbacakkhu* has to be developed first, but like *sammāsati* (“right mindfulness”) in the *pañca-bala* (“five [mental] powers”), it binds the diverse *abhiññās* together as a synecdoche for the range of omniscience itself. Indeed, the centrality of *dibbacakkhu* functions in the same way that “vision” or “seeing” is a stand-in for *paññā* writ large in Buddhism. Reinforcing the fundamental role of the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* in the *abhiññās* as a whole, it says the following in the *Vism*:

Then knowledge that has those deeds as its object arises in him in this way, “It was after doing this.” This is what is called knowledge of faring according to deeds (*yathākammūpagañāṇa*). There is no special preliminary work for this. And as in this case, so too in the case of knowledge of the future (*anāgataṃsañāṇa*); for these have the divine eye as their basis and their success is dependent on that of the divine eye.³⁴⁷ (*Vism* trans. Ñāṇamoli [1956] 2011, 417)

On the basis of this passage, the *Vism* clearly states that *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa* derives from the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa*, along with the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa*. There is no separate *parikamma* for both since they arise following the acquisition of the *dibbacakkhu*. The passage from the *Paṭṭhāna* cited above underlies the *Vism*'s explanation of the *yathākammūpaga* and the *anāgataṃsa*, clarifying that the *dibbacakkhu* is the root *abhiññā*, at least in terms of the *upanissāya* causal relation.

³⁴⁷ *Atha assa idaṃ nāma kammaṃ katvā ti taṃ kammārammaṇaṃ ñāṇaṃ uppajjati. Idaṃ yathākammūpagañāṇaṃ nāma, imassa viṣuṃ parikammaṃ nāma n'atthi. Yathā c' imassa evaṃ anāgataṃsañāṇassa pi. Dibbacakkhupādakān'eva hi imāni dibbacakkhunā sah'eva ijjhanti* (*Vism* 424,³⁵-425,⁵)

The Mingun Jetavana, for his part, seems to be combining the order of the *abhiññās* as found in the Vism with the number of *abhiññās* in the *Paṭṭhāna*, adding the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa* and the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa* as perhaps the most difficult *abhiññās* to attain. He is also falling the lead of these two texts in reinforcing the central role of the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* in his sevenfold scheme of the *abhiññās*. For the Mingun Jetavana, the *pubbenivāsan-ñāṇa*, the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa*, and the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa* represent three different temporal aspects of the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa*; another way to put this derivative relationship is that there is no separate *jhanic* state for the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa*, the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa*, and the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa*. On one level, this is intuitive, because one “sees” into the past, just as one “sees” into the future. The ability to see into the future is nothing but directing the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* to states that have not yet come. In the thirteenth-century Sinhalese *Saddharma Ratnavaliya (Jewels of the Dhamma)*, there is a localised retelling of the Mil. During an account of the Second Council, Monk Yasa and King Kālāsōka use their *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* to look into the future, thereby displaying the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa*:

Thereafter, casting their Divine Eyes to see what further dangers might undermine the work they had just completed in establishing the Order, they foresaw that in the time of King Dhamrāsoka, son of Bindusāra, sixty thousand Tirthakas would don monk’s robes, not because they were fit to do so but merely for profit. (Saddh-rtn trans. Obeyesekere 1991, 61)

Like the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa*, the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa* is an image-based kind of knowledge, and presaging the future is to intuit how current conditions unfold and present phenomena play out. The position of the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* as the basis of the other *abhiññās* is made clear in the following quote from the Mil-a, where the Mingun Jetavana parses an episode where multiple *abhiññās* intersect in the narrative of the root text. Though extensive, the paragraph is given in full, since three *abhiññās* are discussed:

“Now Venerable Assagutta said this to the assembly of bhikkhus.” One should understand this utterance [of Assagutta identifying Mahāsenā in the Mil] as being due to Assagutta’s achievement of the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa*, his achievement of the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa*, [and] his achievement of the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa*. Having focused his sight towards the upper world of the gods, he sees a prince called Mahāsenā living in the heavenly palace called the Ketumatī; when he saw that, [he said:] “Friends, there is in the realm of the 33 gods, to the east of Indra’s Vejayanta palace, a palace called Ketumatī”—he spoke these words on account of his [having acquired the] *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa*. Concentrating in this way, he [thought], “By what karma does this prince Mahāsenā enjoy the attainment of the palace called Ketumatī?” And now it occurs to him: “This is certainly (*nāma*) because of the past actions which he has done”; “knowledge [of that kamma] arises taking that past action as its object.” When he knew [it is said in the root text that], “A prince called Mahāsenā lives there,” those words he said on account of his [having acquired the] *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa*. [There is the following sentence in the root text:] “This god Mahāsenā, after becoming Nāgasena in the next life, will be able [to converse with Milinda & settle his doubts].” When he knew that, [he also knew, as per the following line from the root text,] “He will be capable of subduing his doubts in conversing with King Milinda.” Those words he spoke on account of his achievement of the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa*.³⁴⁸

Instead of providing an analysis of the grammar or lexical expositions, the commentator explains each utterance and event of this particular episode with reference to an *abhiññā*, a strategy characteristic of this whole chapter. What is unique about the comment above is how the Mingun Jetavana weaves together three separate *abhiññās* to explain a single, relatively brief moment in the root text. Yet the confluence of these three *abhiññās* is not by accident, for in what follows, the Mingun Jetavana writes:

In regard to these three (*abhiññās*), the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* was perfect and the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa* was also just perfect. [But] Assagutta had no individual

³⁴⁸ *Atha kho āyasmā assagutto bhikkusaṅghaṃ etadavocā ti idaṃ vacanaṃ dibbacakkhuññāṇakiccayathākammūpagaññāṇakiccaanāgataṃsaññāṇakiccavasena yojitabbaṃ/ uparidevalokābhimukhaṃ ālokaṃ vaḍḍhetvā passata mahāsenadevaputtaṃ ketumatīṃ nāma vimānasampattiṃ anubhavamānaṃ ti dassanakāle atthāvuso tāvatiṃsabhavane vejayantassa pācinato ketumatī nama vimānaṃ ti etaṃ vacanaṃ dibbacakkhuññāṇavasena avoca/ so evaṃ manasikaroti kiṃ nu kammaṃ katvā ayaṃ mahāsenadevaputto imaṃ ketumatīṃ nāma vimānasampattiṃ anubhavatī ti/ athassa idaṃ nāma katvā ti taṃ kammārammaṇaṃ ñāṇaṃ uppajjatī ti jānanakāle tattha mahāseno nāma devaputto paṭivasatī ti etaṃ vacanaṃ yathākammūpagaññāṇavasena avoca/ ayaṃ mahāsenadevaputto anantarbhava nāgaseno hutvā paṭibalo bhavissatī ti jānanakāle so paṭibalo tena milindena raññā saddhiṃ sallapitum kaṅkhaṃ paṭivinetum ti etaṃ vacanaṃ anāgataṃsaññāṇakiccavasena avoca/ tīsu ca dibbacakkhuññāṇaṃ sampannaṃ pana yathākammūpagaññāṇaṃ pi sampannaṃ eva/ imassa viṣuṃ parikammaṃ nāma natthi/ yathā cimassa evaṃ anāgataṃsaññāṇassa pi (Mil-a 18,¹⁷⁻³³)*

preparation for this. Just as he had [no preparation] for the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa*. These [latter two *abhiññās*] which are rooted in the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* flourish along with the *dibbacakkhu*. For the *dibbacakkhu* was not to be attained by just anyone. “It was to be obtained by the child of a good family making preparation for it.” The discourse on the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* should be told for the purpose of helping the child of a good family.³⁴⁹

In this paragraph, the commentator explicitly reduces the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa* and the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa* to the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa*. The Mingun Jetavana states that no separate *parikamma* is needed to achieve the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa* and the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa*, since these “flourish along with the divine eye.” Once one has mastered the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa*, the other two *abhiññā* arise naturally, that is, after one has made the necessary preparations for the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa*. Hence the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* is the fundamental *abhiññā* in the scheme of the Mingun Jetavana, a scheme that is itself fundamental to the vision of Mil-a.

The reason why the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* is so important for the Mingun Jetavana is because of its allegorical power, especially given the strong link between visual metaphors and knowledge in Buddhist literature. Indeed, the sense of sight is elevated among the five physical sense doors, if only because of its figurative affinity to knowing reality, such as in phrases like the one mentioned in previous chapters, *bhūtaṃ bhūtato passatha* (“you all should see the real as the real”). Demonstrating the importance of vision and seeing to knowledge and *paññā*, there are listed five types of “eyes” in the *Niddesa* of the *Khuddakanikāya*, namely, the *maṃsa-cakkhu* (“eye organ”), the *dibba-cakkhu*, the *paññā-cakkhu* (“eye of wisdom”), the *buddha-cakkhu* (“eye of a buddha”), and the *samanta-cakkhu* (“eye of all-around [knowledge]”), the last of which is “a frequent appellation of the Buddha” (Nyanatiloka [1952b] 1980, 80–81). This last point is crucial, because the *samanta-cakkhu* is not just a “frequent appellation of the Buddha,” but a

³⁴⁹ *dibbacakkhupādakāneva hi imāni dibbacakkhunā saheva ijhanti/ dibbacakkhuñāṇaṃ pi hi na yena vā tena vā paṭilabhitabbaṃ/ tassa parikammaṃ karontena pana kulaputtena paṭilabhitabbaṃ ti kulaputtasaṅgahaṇatthāya dibbacakkhuñāṇakathā kathetabbā* (Mil-a 18,³³-19,²)

synecdoche for the Buddha’s omniscience as a whole. Hence the reason why the Mingun Jetavana emphasizes the *abhiññās*—with the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* at their centre—is because they represent the Buddha’s omniscience erupting into the Mil itself. The fleeting accounts of the *abhiññās* in the root text may be brief, but for the Mingun Jetavana, unlike for more secularly-oriented scholars historically uninterested or unmoved by claims to omniscience, these moments represent the *samanta-cakkhu* of the Buddha peering into the present, even though and perhaps especially because this text is not even attributed to the Buddha himself. The *abhiññās* are thus the encapsulation of the Buddha’s enlightenment experience, the omniscience of which the Mingun Jetavana attempts to harness in his commentary.

7.4 *Kasiṇas* and the Reconceptualization of Space

One opening that this harnessing of the Buddha’s omniscience provides the Mingun Jetavana is a chance to reorientate himself towards physical space. In essence, the *abhiññās* as signifiers of the Buddha’s omniscience offer the Mingun Jetavana a means to approach vast spatial distances in a way that transcends and flattens them in his commentary. The impetus in the root text for the Mingun Jetavana is an episode where Buddhist monks in Milinda’s realm are called upon to travel to the Himalayan mountains by the monk Assagutta in order to convene a meeting on how best to deal with the intellectual harassment by the king then threatening the integrity of the *sāsana*. This episode forms part of the root text that so perturbed Kham Bunnag and his European visitors. The sentence from the root text that acts as a catalyst for the Mingun Jetavana is rather innocuous in its original context: “The monks for the most part go just to the

Himalayas”³⁵⁰ (Mil 6,³⁻⁴). The Mingun Jetavana seizes upon this fleeting sentence to proclaim that “[only] a few monks without the *iddhis* were able to go to the Himalayas.”³⁵¹ In order to reckon the immensity of the journey and then collapses this incredible distance into a single moment, the Mingun Jetavana first invokes the Vism’s discussion of the *iddhividha-ñāṇa*, the *abhiññā* which the Thilone and Pannasara were claimed to have displayed in the last chapter. Against his usual pattern in the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa* of multipage excerpts, the Mingun Jetavana proceeds to offer us (at Mil-a 14,²⁵⁻³³) a (relatively) brief quote on what he calls “the story of the knowledge of various supernormal powers (P. *iddhividha-ñāṇa-kathā*) from the Vism:

‘Seated cross-legged he travels in space like a winged bird’: he is normally an obtainer of the earth-*kaṣiṇa* attainment. He adverts to space. Having adverted, he resolves with knowledge: ‘Let there be earth.’ There is earth. He travels, stands, sits, and lies down in space, in the sky. Just as [people] normally not possessed of supernormal power travel, stand, sit, and lie down on earth, so this possessor of supernormal power, by [their] attaining of mental mastery, travels, stands, sits, and lies down in space, in the sky.³⁵² (Vism trsl Ñāṇamoli [1956] 2011, 390)

Rather than discussing the *iddhividha-ñāṇa* proper here, the Mingun Jetavana selects an excerpt on *kaṣiṇa* meditation from the Vism. *Kaṣiṇa* meditation uses a preliminary visual object of meditation, a *parikamma-nimitta* in Pali, to develop intense concentration with the aim of being able to recreate that image in eidetic form in the mind. These *kaṣiṇas* are categorised according to their particular objects of focus, whether an earthen disc, a solid colour, or an empty space carved into a wall. There are all together 10 *kaṣiṇas*, starting with the four elements of earth (P.

³⁵⁰ *bhikkhū pana yebhuyyena himavantameva gacchanti* (Mil 6,³⁻⁴)

³⁵¹ *aniddhimanto bhikkhū pana appakena himavantam gantum sakkonti* (Mil-a 14,¹³⁻¹⁴)

³⁵² *ākāse pi pallaṅkena kamati seyyathā pi pakkhī sakuṇo ti/ pakatiyā pathāvīkaṣiṇasamāpattiyā lābhi hoti/ ākāsam āvajjati/ āvajjivā ñāṇena adhiṭṭhāti pathavī hotū ti/ pathavī hoti/ so ākāse antalikkhe caṅkamati pi tiṭṭhati pi nisīdati pi/ seyyam pi kappeti/ yathā manussā pakatiyā aniddhimanto pathaviyam caṅkamanti pi/ pe/ seyyam pi kappenti/ evameva so iddhimā cetovasīpatto ākāse antalikkhe caṅkamati pi/ pe/ seyyam pi kappeti ti* (Vism 397,⁸⁻¹⁶)

pathavī), water (P. *āpa*), fire (P. *teja*) and air (P. *vāya*), followed by the four primary colours of blue (P. *nīpa*), yellow (P. *pīta*), red (P. *lohita*) and white (P. *odāta*), and capped by the *kaṣiṇas* of light (P. *āloka*³⁵³) and space (P. *ākāsa*) (PED, s.v. *kaṣiṇa*). It is important to note that in the scheme of *samatha* meditation, the first five *jhānas* are attained through the 10 *kaṣiṇa* objects (Sīlānanda, 2012, III:319). In this sense, achieving the *kaṣiṇas* constitutes one of the *parikammās* required to unlock the *abhiññās*.

From the Vism passage he cited above, it is clear the Mingun Jetavana is taking the *kaṣiṇas* as the source of the ability of monks to travel to the mountain-top meeting with Assagutta in the Mil. To emphasize his point, the Mingun Jetavana invokes another *kaṣiṇā*, the *ākāsa-kaṣiṇa* (“space *kaṣiṇa*”):

Then indeed the Venerable Assagutta, having heard the speech of King Milinda with the divine-ear faculty, convoked the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* on the summit of Mount Yugandhara, and asked the monks the question [about how to deal with Milinda]. Is it easy to hear this speech? Is it very difficult to go in an instant to the summit of Mount Yugandhara, to the assembly with the bhikkhus? Indeed, the mountain[s] in the Himalayas are 3,000-*yojanas* wide, 500-*yojanas* high, and have 84,000 peaks. Therefore, [with] Mount Rakkhitatala encircled by 84,000 peaks in the Himalayas, and with the billion[-strong] (*koṭisatehi*) *bhikkhu-saṅgha* collected and sitting, headed by Venerable Assagutta, [they] just then hopped over these 84,000 peaks, encircled them seven times, and at that moment even jumped over the mountains; but it was very difficult to go to the place with the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* assembled, on the summit of Mount Yugandhara, 42,000-*yojanas* high. However much it is difficult for one ordinary person on [such a] journey, [for] the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* it is simply easy. Indeed, possessing the *iddhis*, the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* [at that time], if it wishes, seizes what is also far, and makes it near.³⁵⁴

³⁵³ According to Rhys Davids, this version of the 10 *kaṣiṇa* is a later development found in the *Visuddhimagga*, with the *viññāna-kaṣiṇa* (“consciousness *kaṣiṇa*”) as the last *kaṣiṇa* in earlier iterations (PED, s.v. *kaṣiṇa*).

³⁵⁴ *atha kho āyasmā assagutto dibbāya sotadhātuyā milindassa rañño vacanaṃ sutvā yugandharamatthake bhikkhusaṅghaṃ sannipātetvā bhikkhū pucchī ti idaṃ vacanaṃ sotuṃ pana sukarameva/ taṅkhaṇe yeva yugandharamatthake bhikkhusaṅghena sannipatitaṭṭhānaṃ gantuṃ pana atidukkarameva/ himavante hi pabbato tiyojanasahassavittinno/ pañcayojanasatubbedho/ tassa kūṭāni caturāsītisahassāni/ iti imehi caturāsītisahassehi kūṭehi parikkhitte himavante pabbate rakkhitatale nissinnena koṭisatehi saṅgahitena āyasmatā assaguttapamukhena taṅkhaṇe yeva tāni caturāsītisahassāni kūṭāni laṅghitvā sattaparibhaṅḍake pabbate laṅghitvā taṅkhaṇe yeva dvācattālisayojanasahassubbedhe yugandharamatthake bhikkhusaṅghena sannipatitaṭṭhānaṃ gantuṃ pana*

In this passage, the Mingun Jetavana enumerates the incomprehensible dimensions and peaks of the Himalayas, which can be almost instantly surmounted only by those who have sufficiently developed the *ākāsa-kasiṇa*. Here is a clear example of the Mingun Jetavana unlocking the power of the *abhiññās* to remake what is possible, flattening vast distances in an instance in a way inconceivable by ordinary worldlings. In this act of flattening, the Mingun Jetavana is laying out the soteriological landscape of the root text, one which is different in degree to our own, but not fundamentally different in kind. As such, the sacred geography of the South Asian subcontinent is condensed in the Mil-a and circumscribed by the power of the *abhiññās*.³⁵⁵

In this discussion, the Mingun Jetavana appears to be reading the events of the root text quite literally, ignoring alternative ways that this episode could be explained in a more demythologized way, like we might expect from Kham Bunnag and even, perhaps, Adiccavamsa. As Anālayo has shown, later commentaries and the Chinese Āgamas had at least two ways of explaining such fantastical feats in the Tipiṭaka. Either the billion monks levitated and physically travelled to the Himalayas to meet with Assagutta in person, or instead, their mind-made bodies made the journey by some means of astral-travel, in which their physical bodies

atidukkarameva/ kiñcā pi atidukkarameva pākatikena purisagamanena/ bhikkhusaṅgho pana sukaro yeva/ bhikkhusaṅgho hi iddhimā sace icchatī dūre pi gahetvā santike karoti (Mil-a 16,³¹-17,¹¹)

³⁵⁵ The relationship between the *kasiṇas* and the *abhiññās* is developed in the Pali *aṭṭhakathās*. While both the *abhiññās* and the development of eidetic images based on the *kasiṇas* are achieved through *samatha* meditation and the attainment of the *jhānas*, the Mingun Jetavana needs to explain, vis-à-vis these states, the connection between the *kasiṇas* and the *iddhividha-ñāṇa*. The *pathavī-kasiṇa* is associated with the first four *jhānas*, at least according to the *Visuddhimagga* in the extensive chapter dedicated to the *pathavī-kasiṇa*, the *Pathavī-kasiṇa-niddesa* (Vism 118,¹-169,³⁰). In contrast, the *iddhividha-ñāṇa* is associated with the fifth *jhāna* (Nandamālābhivamsa 2016, 234), and so does not technically overlap with the *pathavī-kasiṇa*, though in practice, these divisions are not absolute and are the subject of debate in the commentarial literature. Unlike the *pathavī-kasiṇa*, the *ākāsa-kasiṇa* just mentioned is not associated with the first four *jhānas*, but rather, has a special role in the fifth. As such, it is from the fifth *jhāna*, starting with the *iddhividha-ñāṇa*, that one begins to access the *abhiññās*.

never actually left the meditation seat (Anālayo 2016a, 16). Anālayo argues that in the earliest layers of Pali texts, such journeys over immense stretches of space would have been completed with the mind-made body, but “[p]robably as a result of literalism,” it was soon interpreted that such journeys were done by monks flying through the air (Anālayo 2016a, 21). The Mingun Jetavana is clearly taking the second, more literalist approach. For him, these monks travelled to the Himalayan mountains in the flesh, and it was the *iddhividha-ñāṇa*, through the development of *kaṣiṇa* concentration, that enabled them to do so. In other words, the Mingun Jetavana is not seeking some allegorical meaning to this episode, but taking it at face value.

What is remarkable is that given his earlier declarations that the *abhiññās* are indeed still accessible, the Mingun Jetavana is also suggesting that such supernormal modes of transportation are possible even in his own time, if not exceedingly rare. In terms of the Mil-a as a whole, this literalist mode of reading is crucial to recognize, because it provides the Mingun Jetavana a drastically different template in which to rearticulate his relationship to physical space, one wherein great distances can be easily bridged through the fruits of meditation practice. With this “transcendental” relationship to space in his commentary, the Mingun Jetavana’s portrayal of *sāsana* history is no longer restricted to the confines of his small writing hut in Mingun town where he was isolated when composing the Mil-a. His vision is not even limited to the whole of Burma but encompasses the Himalayas which were so easily traversed by the billion monks in the Mil along with the sacred geography of the South Asian subcontinent. Reconceptualizing space in this way is crucial for the Mingun Jetavana because it expands the horizon over which the history of *sāsana* unfolds, a history that he is seeking to encapsulate in his work. The consequence for the Mingun Jetavana of his expansive relationship to space is not just confined to physical distance, because space and time are inextricably linked in the narrative

of the *sāsana*'s past, present, and future. As such, using the *iddhividha-ñāṇa* to redefine historical space allows the Mingun Jetavana to redefine historical time, which is what we see in the next *abhiññā*.

7.5 *Pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa* and the Reconceptualization of Time

Thus far the words and interpretations of the Mingun Jetavana have been analysed, but now the discussion turns to his selection and use of sources, which for a commentator, is almost as telling as their own explications. Crosby presents the Mingun Jetavana's modern reform method of *vipassanā* as grounded in a "normative account of meditation derived from and authorised by the 5th century CE commentator Buddhaghosa" (Crosby 2013, 12). The Mingun Jetavana does not just rely on the authority of "Buddhaghosa" as epitomized in the *Vism* for his method of *vipassanā*, for as we have seen already in the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa*, the Mingun Jetavana quotes extensively from the *Vism* when detailing the *parikamma* needed to achieve the *abhiññās*. This method of extensively quoting the *Vism* starts with the processes by which one can remember their past lives. The Mingun Jetavana actually begins his treatment of the individual *abhiññās* with the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa* in order to explain the framing-story of the *Mil* itself, namely, the past lives of Nāgasena and Milinda. The section of the *Vism* quoted by the Mingun Jetavana includes instructions for a monastic practitioner to access memories of previous existences through a quotidian, step by step process. Over several pages taken verbatim from the *Vism*, without any intervening explanation or analysis, the Mingun Jetavana selects excerpts that deal with the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa* in two temporal directions, as Steven Collins points out, *paṭiloma* ("backward") and *anuloma* ("biographical" or "forward moving") time (Collins 2009, 511). An example of the *paṭiloma* direction of time is found in the following excerpt chosen by the

Mingun Jetavana (at Mil-a 9,⁸⁻¹⁸) from the Vism, where instructions are provided for a monastic to access their past lives after coming back from an alms round. According to this passage,

a bhikkhu who is a beginner and wants to recollect in this way should go into solitary retreat on return from his alms round after his meal. Then he should attain the four jhānas in succession and emerge from the fourth jhāna as basis for direct-knowledge. [One] should then advert to [one's] most recent act of sitting down, next, to the preparation of the seat, to the entry into the lodging, to the putting away of the bowl and robe, to the time of eating, to the time of returning from the village, to the time of wandering for alms in the village, to the time of entering the village, to the time of setting out from the monastery, to the time of paying homage at the shrine terrace and the Enlightenment-tree terrace, to the time of washing the bowl, to the time of picking up the bowl, to the things done from the time of picking up the bowl back to the mouth washing, to the things done in the early morning, to the things done in the middle watch, in the first watch. In this way he should advert to all the things done during the whole night and day in reverse order. While this much, however, is evident even to his normal consciousness, it is especially evident to his preliminary-work consciousness.³⁵⁶ (Vism trans. Ñāṇamoli [1956] 2011, 406)

In the description that follows, this process of recalling is extrapolated days and decades into the past, from sleep to waking to sleep again countless times. The practitioner can take this process to the very end of this life (i.e., the end of this series of aggregates) and into the next. Indeed, once the practitioner is able to break through the moment of “death and rebirth linking” (*P. cutipaṭisandhi*) that defines the limits of their current existence, or *vāsa* (“dwelling”), and provided they are sufficiently spiritually advanced, they can theoretically use this *paṭiloma* process of memory to continue back into their sojourn in *samsāra* indefinitely. Rather than being a paranormal or fantastic process, remembering your past lives is described here as grounded in

³⁵⁶ *evamanussaritukāmena ādikammikena bhikkhunā pacchābhattaṃ piṇḍapātapaṭikkantena rahogatena paṭisallinena paṭipāṭiyā cattāri jhānāni samāpajjitvā abhiññāpādakacatutthajjhānato vuṭṭhāya sabbapacchimā nisajjā āvajjitabbā. tato āsanapaññāpanaṃ, senāsanappavesanaṃ, pattacīvarapaṭisāmanaṃ, bhojanakālo, gāmato āgamanakālo, gāme piṇḍāya caritakālo, gāmaṃ piṇḍāya pavitṭhakālo, vihārato nikkhamanakālo, cetiyaṅgaṇabodhiyaṅgaṇavandanakālo, pattadhovanakālo, pattapaṭiggahaṇakālo, pattapaṭiggahaṇato yāva mukhadhovanā katakiccaṃ, paccūsakāle katakiccaṃ, majjhimayāme katakiccaṃ, paṭhamayāme katakiccanti evaṃ paṭilomakkamena sakalaṃ rattindivaṃ katakiccaṃ āvajjitabbā. ettakaṃ pana pakaticittassapi pākaṭaṃ hoti. parikammasamādhicittassa pana ativiya pākaṭameva* (Vism 412,¹⁸⁻³²)

the meticulous activation of dormant and otherwise unremarkable memories through concentration and serial recall.

From the “external academic perspective” he took in his own article, Collins describes the Vism as an “imaginative project,” claiming the backwards *paṭiloma* process described above is free from any “phenomenological” reality (Collins 2009, 518). We might say that Collins’ perspective is an “attempt to explain away” the *abhiññās*, a trend identified by Bradley Clough that belies scholarly “anxiety” about the *abhiññās* “as truly realizable” (Clough 2010, 417). Collins’s remarks reflect what Skilton, Crosby, and Pyi Phyo Kyaw have called an “an attitude (conscious or not) that the experiential component of textual descriptions of meditation are in fact only textual, i.e. are only fictive literary claims, for which the only legitimate standards of assessment are theoretical and textual” (Skilton, Crosby, and Pyi Phyo Kyaw 2019, 6). Pointing out Collins’ approach here is not meant to assess the validity of his claims or perspective, but rather, to juxtapose his approach with that of the Mingun Jetavana. To the former, the *abhiññās* serve a literary function in the Pali imaginaire but are void of any epistemological efficacy and material reality; for the latter, the Vism’s account of the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa* describes legitimate and tangible experience, if not of the Mingun Jetavana himself, then of others in the past and even in the present. Indeed, Arhañ Revata (အရှင်ဇေယျဝံသ, 1971-), a principle teacher in the Pa-Auk tradition from Burma today, “describes in detail how he tried to see past lives after listening to his teacher’s explanation of the two methods for doing this” (Skilton, Crosby, and Pyi Phyo Kyaw 2019, 10). By invoking the Vism’s portrayal of the solitary practitioner proceeding through their succession of circadian recollections, the Mingun Jetavana is offering his reader what he sees as an acutely rational and empirical account of something quite extraordinary, the remembrance of past lives. In a word, the Mingun Jetavana is *naturalizing* the *pubbenivāsa-*

ñāṇa. This “naturalistic” quality of the Mingun Jetavana’s selection from the Vism is reinforced when we realize that the Mingun Jetavana skipped altogether the accounts of the destruction and creation cycles of this world system, the endless, geological cycles that are found in the fuller passage of the Vism.³⁵⁷ These fantastical scenes are the extreme end of the backwards *paṭiloma* process in this text, where the practitioner and reader both witness the “aeons of world contraction” (Vism trans. Ñāṇamoli [1956] 2011, 410) that form a collective memory of past lives, representing a prosaic description of medieval Buddhist cosmogony.

Yet in the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa* of his commentary, the Mingun Jetavana omits this surrealistic description entirely, going from the deep post-meal ruminations of a solitary monk to the Vism’s enumeration of eight types of objects for the remembrance of past lives. Instead of curating epic scenes of world destruction, where oceans dry and seven suns appear, the Mingun Jetavana selects an abstract discussion on the “[k]nowledge of past lives [which] occurs with respect to eight kinds of object, that is to say, as having a limited, exalted, or measureless object, path as object, a past object, and an internal, external, or not-so-classifiable object” (Vism trans. Ñāṇamoli [1956] 2011, 425). For someone who practices and promotes *vipassanā* meditation, the focus on meditation objects makes sense, with this list acting as a sort of literary device that re-averts our attention and keeps the reader grounded; compared to the scenes of mountains collapsing and world systems catching fire in the fuller passage of the Vism on the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa*, the Mingun Jetavana’s theoretical diversion into a technical and terse list of abstract objects focuses the attention back onto the reader and the task at hand, namely, how to

³⁵⁷ The Mingun Jetavana does, however, include this description later on in the Mil-a, at pages 137,¹⁷ to 146,¹⁹ (Mizuno 2000, 13–14).

parikamma of the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa*. Indeed, the vast contrast between aeons of world contraction and the eight types of objects suggests the Mingun Jetavana is trying to present a version of the *abhiññās* couched in terms of imminently accessible, rote meditational practice.

Yet there is a deeper agenda at play in the Mingun Jetavana's discussion of the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa*. For unlike an ordinary disciple, the Buddha is not constrained by the *paṭiloma* order of memory, at least in the worldview emerging from the Mil-a. In the excerpts the Mingun Jetavana selects from the Vism, the hierarchy of historical memory is topped by the forward-looking, biographical *anuloma* temporality of the Buddha and other highly accomplished beings. Instead of starting from the present moment back to the past, as others necessarily do, *anuloma* temporality starts from somewhere (anywhere) in the past and continues to the present moment. Crucially for my argument here, this *anuloma* temporality is not even limited by the present but can break through into the future. The inherent potential of the *anulomic* command over time as it is exercised by the Buddha is thus essential to the broader argument being made by the Mingun Jetavana as it emerges in this and the subsequent chapter. For the *anuloma* perspective allows the commentator to develop arguments embedded in the mind of the Buddha, who looks past the present and sees the full arc of *sāsana* decline and, perhaps even more importantly, the factors in its prolongation. Hence establishing the basis of the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa* and the Buddha's ability to traverse time in both a *paṭiloma* and *anuloma* direction affords the Mingun Jetavana a different model of history altogether, one premised on the omniscience of the Buddha coursing through the Tipiṭaka, including in the Mil. This model thus represents a "paradigm of omniscience" wherein the Mingun Jetavana can interpolate, access, and thereby articulate the trajectory of the *sāsana* without the constraints of the irreversibility of time and the unknowability of the future. This is not to say that the Mingun

Jetavana is claiming the ability to travel through history in both *anuloma* and *paṭiloma* directions for himself, but rather, he is claiming that the Buddha had such an ability and more importantly, used it when creating the aesthetic whole that the Tipiṭaka represents. In essence, the same thing that the *iddhividha-ñāṇa* allows him to do for space, the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa* allows him to do for time: bridge the divide between two virtually irreconcilable gulfs, the time of the Buddha in South Asia and the *vimutti khet* in Burma. This “bending” of space and especially time is key to the agenda of the Mingun Jetavana in the Mil-a, especially when it comes to the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa*.

7.6 *Anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ Naya*

There are indeed several instances in the root text where the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa* plays a crucial role in the causal logics of the first chapter of the Mil, like when Assagutta predicts the fate of the god Mahāsenā in his heavenly palace, when Milinda knows without doubt that he would be defeated in debate by Nāgasena, and indeed, when the Buddha predicts the meeting of the two protagonists 500 years after his *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa*. It is thus no surprise that, following the *Paṭṭhāna*, the Mingun Jetavana adds this *abhiññā* as the seventh *abhiññā* in his own list to start the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa*. Yet the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa* has not always been an established power of the Buddha or other practitioners, especially when we look at the earliest strands of Pali literature. The *Nikāyas*, according to Endo, “are ambiguous about the knowledge concerning the future” (Endo 2016, 56), especially in light of claims made by rival ascetics and their followers. “The late canonical texts, however, show a quite different picture altogether,” explain Endo, who then cites examples from the *Paṭisambhidamagga* that explicitly attribute this *abhiññā* to the Buddha (Endo 2016, 56). By the time the commentarial period comes, this trend is underscored with

“expressions like ‘*atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ sabbaṃ jānāti*,’ meaning [the omniscient one] is “he who knows everything concerning the past, future and present” (Endo 2016, 57). Hence the commentarial tradition inherited by the Mingun Jetavana had firmly established the omniscience of the Buddha and the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa* that such omniscience enabled.

For the Mingun Jetavana, the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa* had an especially fundamental role to how he articulated and justified his controversial calls for reform. In his groundbreaking introduction to his transliteration of the Mil-a, Deshpande labels the Mingun as a “religious reformer” who “couched these reformist ideas as doctrines passed on [by the Buddha] to future monks (*anāgatabhikkūnaṃ esa nayo dinno*)” (Deshpande 1999, 7). According to this concept as formulated by the Mingun Jetavana, the Mil contains quasi-esoteric lessons or hitherto-hidden meanings that were embedded for monks far into the future, when the conditions for such lessons and meanings would be conducive for the full ripening of their relevance. In this formulation, the Mingun Jetavana is not merely projecting on the root text, for this concept of *anāgatabhikkūnaṃ naya* (“methods for future monks”) is quite apt for the Mil, since the purpose of Nāgasena being reborn in the human realm is exactly that—to save the future of Buddhism with doctrines and teachings that will reverberate for millennia and be useful for scenarios not yet known but anticipated. To this effect, there are several allusions to this concept in an inchoate form in the Mil itself, allusions which may have inspired the Mingun Jetavana to make this concept a major feature and driving force of his commentary. For instance, in regard to a question in a later chapter about whether there is any merit procured from offering *puja* to a Buddha who has passed into *parinibbāna*, which is supposed to final and complete, Milinda contends that

This is a dilemma which has two horns. It is not a matter within the scope of those who have no mind, it is a question fit for the great. Tear asunder this net of heresy, put it on

one side. To you this puzzle has been put. Give to the future Sons of the Conqueror eyes wherewith to see the riddle to the confusion of their adversaries.³⁵⁸ (Mil trans. Rhys Davids [1890] 1963, I:145)

The key phrase here is “*anāgatānaṃ jinaputtānaṃ cakkhuṃ*,” or “eyes for the future sons of the conqueror,” which is strongly suggestive of the Mingun Jetavana’s “*anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ naya*,” while also invoking the power of sight and the role of vision in the *abhiññās* with the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇā* at their core.

There is also an earlier passage with a similar sentiment, one that reveals a different structuring logic of the Mil itself. In this passage, Milinda expresses that

Doubt has arisen in me, revered sir. In the words of the Conqueror there are questions that are dilemmas. Contention about them will arise in the distant future, and in the distant future discerning (men) like you will be hard to find. Give insight to these questions of mine for the refutation of those holding other tenets.³⁵⁹ (Mil trans. Horner 1969b, I:131)

This second passage does not mention “*anāgatānaṃ jinaputtānaṃ*,” but in this case, *anāgata addhāna* (“future time”) itself becomes the subject. Milinda however again mentions “*cakkhu*,” and Horner provides a footnote pointing out the difference between the *maṃsa-cakkhu*, the *dibba-cakkhu*, and the *paññā-cakkhu* to explain what is meant here (Horner 1969b, I:131 fn. 7).

Compared to the first passage above, the stakes are raised even further in this case, for the doubt harbored by Milinda is not just about a single dilemma here and there but strikes at the very integrity of the *jinabhāsītā* (“the words of the conqueror”) as a whole. The dilemmas in the Tipiṭaka, according to Milinda, will become the target of *paravādas*, those preaching other views

³⁵⁸ *Uḥhatokoṭṭiko eso pañha, n'eso visayo appattamānasānaṃ, mahantānaṃ yev'eso visayo, bhind'etaṃ diṭṭhijālaṃ, ekaṃse ṭhapaya, tav'eso pañho anuppatto, anāgatānaṃ Jinaputtānaṃ cakkhuṃ dehi paravādaniggahāyati* (Mil 95¹⁵⁻¹⁹)

³⁵⁹ *Saṃsayo me bhante uppanno, atthi meṇḍakapañhā Jinabhāsītā, anāgate addhāne tattha viggaho uppajjissati, anāgate ca addhāne dullabhā bhavissanti tumhādhisā buddhimanto, tesu me pañhesu cakkhuṃ dehi paravādānaṃ niggahāyati* (Mil 94,²¹⁻²⁶)

that Horner equates with “*parappavāda*,” defined in the *aṭṭhakathās* as “heretical” sects (Horner 1969b, I:131 fn. 8). To make sense of the gravity of the moment in the text, it is necessary to realize that at this point, the “debate” between Milinda and Nāgasena has taken a decidedly different shift in tone.³⁶⁰ This “confession” of Milinda’s doubts occurs at the beginning of the *Meṇḍakapañha*, considered a more recent stratum of the text compared to what came before. After initiating the debate as a skeptic accompanied by a massive retinue in the first ninety pages of the text, Milinda has by now assumed the form of the ideal lay devotee, preparing his mind for what is to come by taking the eight precepts and living the life of a monastic before his third meeting with Nāgasena. In the narrative that begins this section, the king is described as one who has “burst forth in wisdom, he is also a *tepiṭaka*,”³⁶¹ meaning that his committed to following and espousing the Tipiṭaka. Yet framing this narrative is an affective shroud of secrecy, so much so that the king asks to meet Nāgasena alone in a secret location free not just of his entourage, but any other individual. After paying obeisance to Nāgasena as a disciple, he declares that “there is for me, O Bhante Nāgasena, some affair that must be consulted³⁶² together with you and it should be desired that no other third person be present.”³⁶³ In fact, Milinda even insists on

³⁶⁰ I must thank Christoph Emmrich for pointing out this shift in the events of the Mil, a fact often overlooked in scholarship on the Mil except by descriptions of a change in the literary style and Pali composition of the text. While it is often held that the *Meṇḍakapañha* is the start of a more recent stratum of the text compared to what comes before, the text itself positions this moment as a change in audience. This same shift is further seen to start the *Opammakathāpañha*, where in a sense, Milinda even does away with ceremonial formalities between teacher and pupil, but is a *yogacārin* deeply committed to practicing austerities and meditation alone in the forest. This might partly explain why this last section of the Mil receives perhaps the least attention in the scholarship on the text, because of its focus on praxis and the qualities of one fully immersed in progressing on the path towards *nibbāna*, which Milinda is said to have eventually achieved.

³⁶¹ *Pabhinnabuddhi hutvāna si pi āsī tīpeṭako* (Mil 90,⁴)

³⁶² တွင်ပင်အပ်သော *tuin pañ ap se*, TPMA, s.v. *mantayitabba*.

³⁶³ *Atthi me bhante Nāgasena koci attho tumhehi saddhiṃ mantayitabbo, na tattha añño koci tatiyo icchitabbo* (Mil 91,¹¹⁻¹²)

removing any physical features of the landscape that might disturb the discussion and brings Nāgasena to a secluded forest, wherein he insists that “no[thing] should be kept secret, no[thing] should be hidden”³⁶⁴ anymore, implying that their earlier discussion was superficial and partly performative. In this sense, the dialogue has entered a stage of almost-esoteric quality, where only the initiated can partake, those who can be trusted not to misconstrue the subtle answers provided by the monk. It is in this setting that the future-orientation of the text is revealed and emphasized, and it is this shift of tone that the Mingun Jetavana is attentive to when formulating the concept of *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ naya*. It is thus no surprise that all of the Mingun Jetavana’s most controversial proposals occur in the *Meṇḍakapañha*, where nothing is to be kept secret or hidden from the audience, both at the time of the text’s composition, but also in the present.

The vital role that the *abhiññās* plays here is that the future practitioners, devotees, and opponents are anticipated, but ultimately unknown and unseen by Nāgasena and Milinda. Yet given the foresight offered by the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa*, the Buddha knows and sees these future opponents, not just with his *dibba-cakkhu*, but with the *samanta-cakkhu*. Indeed, the very premise of the Mil is the meeting of past and future in the prophecy of the Buddha, who foretold that the debate between Nāgasena and Milinda would occur half a millennium after his own passing. In the Mil, it states that:

Then for the whole period between one Buddha and the next these two people wandered from existence to existence among gods and [humans]. And our Buddha saw them too, and just as he did to the son of Moggali and to Tissa the Elder, so to them also did he foretell their future fate, saying: ‘Five hundred years after I have passed away will these two reappear, and the subtle Law and Doctrine taught by me will they two explain, unravelling and disentangling its

³⁶⁴ *guyhaṃ na kātabbaṃ na rahassakaṃ* (Mil 91,¹⁵)

difficulties by questions put and metaphors adduced.³⁶⁵ (Mil trans. Rhys Davids [1890] 1963, I:5–6)

The Mil as a whole can thus be conceived of as a set of methods handed down for future monks, and the Mingun Jetavana is picking up on this special quality of the text upon which he is commenting. Even though the Mil is not explicitly attributed to the Buddha, it is imbued vicariously with his omniscience through the power of prophecy, and it not in spite of but because of this very distance from the Buddha that it is a quintessential emblem of his omniscience. Yet the unique feature of the Mingun Jetavana's commentary is not that he recognizes the future-oriented message of the Mil, or that he devised the concept of the *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ naya*, but that he claims for himself the ability to pick out these interpretative methods embedded in the root text. Such a claim is extremely provocative, especially considering the neoconservative nature of Theravada Buddhism firmly entrenched in power during his time. But to claim this ability for himself, it is imperative that the Mingun Jetavana invoke the world of the *abhiññās*, especially those three that extend the temporal scope of the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* to the past and future. By highlighting the role of the *anāgatāṃsa-ñāṇa* in the root text and expanding the Vism's list of the *chaḷabhiññās* to include this *abhiññā*, the Mingun Jetavana is completing the *parikamma* for his controversial interventions around re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, interventions grounded, according to him, in the activation of the Buddha's omniscience.

³⁶⁵ *Te ubho pi deveṣu ca manussesu ca saṃsarantā ekaṃ buddhantaraṃ khepsuṃ. Atha amhākaṃ Bhagavatā pi yathā Moggaliputta-Tissatthero dissati evaṃ-ete pi dissanti: Mama parinibbānato pañcavassasate atikkante ete uppajjissanti, yaṃ mayā sukhumaṃ katvā desitaṃ dhammavinayaṃ taṃ ete pañhapucchana-opammayutti-vasena nijjatamniḡgumbaṃ katvā vibhajjasantīti niddiṭṭhā* (Mil-a 3¹⁹⁻²⁵)

7.7 *Sabbaññutā-Aṭṭhakathā*: Commentary of Omniscience

At sixty-five pages (from Mil-a 7,^{1-72,23}), the Mingun Jetavana uses the first chapter of his *aṭṭhakathā*, the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa*, to lay down the *modus operandi* of his expansive commentary. After surveying key selections from this first chapter, we return to the question with which we began: why, to the neglect of almost everything else, did the commentator focus his explanations on the *abhiññās* so emphatically? Put another way, what purpose do these *abhiññās* serve in the Mil-a? The most obvious answer can be found on the level of literary analysis. The instances of the *abhiññās* that the Mingun Jetavana seizes on in the root text, though fleeting, are key moments that drive the narrative and render the story possible in the first place. Without mastery of the *kaṣiṇas*, the *saṅgha* would not have been able to convene in the extremes of the Himalayas; bereft of the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa*, the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa*, and the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa*, the head monk Assagutta could not have located Nāgasena in the heavenly realm and assessed his fitness for the task ahead; *sans* the *cetopariya-ñāṇa*, true discipline and education would not have been possible for Nāgasena, who presumptively questioned the wisdom of his teacher, Rohaṇa. And without the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa*, the past lives of Nāgasena and Milinda would not have been known at all, making the premise of this first chapter impossible. *Abhiññās* are thus vital to the Mil in a fundamental way, forming the causal logic of the opening narrative, a fact often overlooked in treatments of the text today.

Beyond the crucial work the *abhiññās* do in moving forward the narrative action of the root text, there is a second answer to the question of what purpose the *abhiññās* serve in the Mil-a. This second answer lies in the fact that in certain fundamental respects, the *abhiññās* constitute the very enlightenment experience of the Buddha. According to Clough, “[t]he *abhiññās* were reckoned by compilers of the *suttas* as both the corollary and sometimes crowning features of

arahant hood” (Clough 2010, 431). Such a valorization of the *abhiññās* is especially evident in the last three *abhiññās* (according to the classic list of six)—the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa*, the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa*, and the *āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa*, two of which form part of the all-important *tevijja*. These three *abhiññās*, the last of which is not mentioned by the Mingun Jetavana to begin his *Pubbayogakaṇḍa*, “stand at the very core of descriptions of Buddha’s experience of liberating awakening,” especially as captured in accounts of the *tevijja* (Clough 2010, 423).³⁶⁶ Once the details of the Buddha’s experience of liberating awakening are examined, the link with the *abhiññās* becomes clear. On the night of his awakening, as described by the Buddha in the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* (*Great Discourse to Saccaka*), his first breakthrough came in the first watch of the night when he attained the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa*, followed by his unlocking of the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa* in the second, and finally, his realization of the *āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa* in the third watch (M I 247,¹⁷-249,²²). Thus, not only do the *abhiññās* constitute an integral part of the Buddha’s enlightenment experience, but they “crown” this experience, as Clough puts it, defining the very nature of what it means to be a *sammāsambuddha*. It is not simply intellectual “insights into selflessness, dependent origination, the four noble truths or any insights considered central to Buddhism, which function to eliminate ignorance and consequently liberate Buddha” (Clough 2010, 424); rather, it is firstly the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa*, with which “one is enabled to experientially substantiate key Buddhist teachings” (Clough 2010, 432), followed by the *yathākammūpaga-ñāṇa* and the *āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa*, which further substantiate then confirm the

³⁶⁶ Fiordalis notes that “in another (perhaps later) version of the Buddha’s awakening, found in the *Catuspariṣat-sūtra*, the Buddha acquires the six “superpowers” instead of the three knowledges, two in each of the three watches” (Fiordalis 2008, 117).

efficacy of such teachings. That is to say, one learns doctrine through words and sounds, but a buddha or an *arahant* experiences doctrine through the *abhiññās* firsthand.

The Mingun Jetavana seems aware of this fact when composing his commentary, a claim which is based on a passage in the Mil-a examined in the last chapter: “numerous ignorant ones who do not wish to discuss even the mere utterance that” there is a possibility that there “are [living] monks endowed with the knowledge of the path, the knowledge of the fruits, and the knowledge of the duties of the *abhiññās*.”³⁶⁷ The quote is repeated in order to dwell on the threefold presentation of the Buddhist path the Mingun Jetavana models here. His list consists of knowledge of the path (P. *magga-ñāṇa*), knowledge of the fruits of the path (P. *phala-ñāṇa*), and the duties of the higher forms of knowledge (P. *abhiññā-kicca*). These first two are related to the goals of *vipassanā* meditation, flashes of *paññā* that accompany the highest levels of *vipassanā-ñāṇa*. The Mingun Jetavana’s meditation manuals and biography makes frequent reference to them. In the following example, a woman devotee early in the Mingun Jetavana’s teaching career (sometime in the first two decades of the twentieth century) is said to have “listened to [his] dhamma talk about the four foundations of mindfulness, which the Buddha described as the only way that can directly lead to the realization of *magga*, *phala* and *nibbāna*” (Bio trans. Hla Myint Tikkhācāra [1957] 2019, 37). In this earlier formulation of the goals of Theravada Buddhism, there is the path (P. *magga*) and the fruits (P. *phala*) of the path, naturally capped by *nibbāna*. This threefold presentation of path, fruits and *nibbāna* is the conventional formula. Yet instead of offering the conventional schema in his commentary, the Mingun Jetavana replaces

³⁶⁷ *maggañāṇena ca samannāgataṃ phalañāṇena ca samannāgataṃ abhiññā-kiccañāṇena ca samannāgataṃ āyasmantaṃ atthī ti vacanamattaṃ pi akathetukāmo appas[s]uto va bahulo hoti* (Mil-a 7,¹²⁻¹⁵)

nibbāna with the *abhiññās*. Indeed, it is not just knowledge of the *abhiññās* that the Mingun replaces *nibbāna* with, but the “duty” or “service” (P. *kicca*) that accompanies them. By this replacement, the Mingun Jetavana is not seeking to minimize *nibbāna* as a goal, but rather, is highlighting an integral aspect of the Buddha’s enlightenment experience that is not always appreciated in contemporary discourses, especially and ironically by those who advocate for the centrality of the Mingun Jetavana’s modern reform method of *vipassanā*, namely, the central and defining role of the *abhiññās* in this experience.

One response to what the Mingun Jetavana is doing with the *abhiññās* in his Mil-a is simply to claim that he is exposing his own outdated premodern assumptions and blind faith to the texts of the Tipiṭaka, that he is naively approaching the Mil as it has been handed down to him without engaging in critical thought or the sophisticated modernist process of demythologizing it and the Buddha’s omniscience. In a word, one could claim he is dabbling in magic, an anachronism set against the rising tide of the scientific worldview, the likes of which caused Kham Bunnag to reinterpret the *Traibhūmi Braḥ R’vañ* as moral allegory. The Mingun Jetavana’s faith in the integrity of the text is not in question here, but such a flattening of the Mingun Jetavana’s sophisticated understanding and deployment of the *abhiññās* fails to appreciate the profoundly modern way he is using them as tools in his commentary and his broader project of the *vimutti khet*. Speaking about scholarly attitudes towards a genre of texts ancillary to the *Rgveda* (the *Rgvidhāna*) and apparent forms of magic or mantras contained therein, Laurie Patton provides a framework for how we might make sense of the operative role of the *abhiññās* in the Mil-a. She writes that when used to describe powers like mantras or, in the case of the Mil-a, the *abhiññās*, “the term [“magic”] serves to cut off important social and exegetical continuities between a religious tradition and its so-called magical counterpart. It

drives a wedge between forms of thought that, from the tradition's eyes, may be integrally connected" (Patton 1977, 2). Indeed, as we have seen, the *abhiññās* are essential components of the Theravada path structure for the Mingun Jetavana, along with serving as an index for the vitality of the *sāsana*. Most importantly, they also epitomize the Buddha's omniscience, both the efficient and formal cause of the *sāsana*. As such, instead of seeing non-normative elements of a text as exhibiting some form of magic, superstition, fable, or a retrograde mindset, Patton suggests that "it is more historically and intellectually productive to call it 'commentarial practice'" (Patton 1977, 1). Such a reorientation in the frames of reference is precisely the aim of the current chapter, to take the *abhiññās* as "intellectual operations" deployed by the Mingun Jetavana, as essential aspects of his "theoretical framework of commentarial practice" (Patton 1977, 7). Within this theoretical framework, the *abhiññās* are not only possible in his own time, signalling the Mingun Jetavana's broader view on *sāsana* vitality, but as I argued above, represent effusions of the Buddha's omniscience, embodied in single moments of narrative action that ultimately hold the text together. The *abhiññās* are thus placeholders for the Buddha's omniscience in a text not even attributed to him, and as such, form the causal logic of the Mingun Jetavana's understanding of the unfolding of the *sāsana* in historical time and social space.

One helpful way to begin approaching this relationship between the Buddha's enlightenment and the act of commentary is found in the work of Heim (2014; 2018b), who submits that commentary is an ongoing project of extrapolating the Buddha's enlightenment, specifically, his omniscience. She argues in her 2014 work that "canonical texts are infinitely expandable, even as they report the Buddha's words. The Buddha's words are expansive by their very nature: they do not end, and the canonical texts are never fully closed. Commentaries,

classifications, and summaries are very natural expansions of meaning embedded in the root text” (Heim 2014, 87). Developing this idea of the “infinite expandability” of the Tipiṭaka further, Heim points to a “tension” between the Tipiṭaka and the Buddha’s omniscience that arises from two competing claims: that the Tipiṭaka is “a finite and complete body of texts” containing authoritative *buddha-vacana*, and that the omniscience stemming from the Buddha’s enlightenment experience knows no limit (Heim 2018b, 109). As a commentator herself, Heim’s task is to resolve this apparent contradiction (an *ubhato-koṭika*), which she does by correcting a category mistake: the Tipiṭaka is not a “body of texts,” but a “process” that is “unfolding and expanding in the very course of the Buddha’s ongoing awakening” (Heim 2018b, 109). In other words, the Tipiṭaka is not a set of nouns, but a never-ending conjugator of verbs.

This unfolding and expanding process is not limited to the lifetime of the Buddha, hence the recursive proliferation of *aṭṭhakathās* into *ṭīkās*, *nissayas*, *vatthus* (“translations”), and so on. For these discursive forms were generated by the moments in the texts when the omniscience of the Buddha made a nuanced but profound appearance, when the words were simply place holders for an endless analysis of meaning open to but not always recognized by future generations. In other words, “perhaps the Buddha’s omniscience was something that commentarial work with the texts discovers, rather than presumes” (Heim 2018b, 15). While it was shown earlier that the concept of omniscience was developed in the post-canonical and commentarial literature, Heim’s point is that such a development was not just an artefact of scholasticism, but a response to features of the Tipiṭaka that defied immediate understanding or articulation, either to the individual or to the historical moment, but which were key parts of the Buddha’s teaching nonetheless. Hence for Heim, the classical *aṭṭhakathās* of Buddhaghosa were

driven by the enigma of Buddha's omniscience and its need for ceaseless re-affirmation throughout the duration of the *sāsana*. In this re-affirmation, the *abhiññās* play a central role.

Conclusion

Heim therefore sets up commentary as a means of recovering the knowledge emanating from the Buddha's enlightenment experience, a phenomenological project to mine the reverberations of the Buddha's omniscience for new insights and lessons. According to this understanding, commentary stands in a relationship of derivation to the Buddha's omniscience. While this is a valid and valuable insight, especially when approaching "Buddhaghosa" not as a historical agent (or set of agents) but as a type of literature in and of itself, the Mil-a and its unique use of the *abhiññās* demonstrates that a subtly different but profoundly distinct calculus is at play here, at least in this particular *aṭṭhakathā* and in light of its tangible historical context and the special role of its author therein. Perhaps in contrast to what we see in the works attributed to "Buddhaghosa," the act of composing commentary is not just derivative for the Mingun Jetavana, but a further cultivation and appropriation of the Buddha's omniscience. In other words, commentary-as-practice is a re-instantiation of the Buddha's omniscience rather than merely a recycling of it. Heim is accurate in presenting the *aṭṭhakathās* as acts of discovery, and this is no doubt an integral feature of the Pali commentarial project when looked at as a literary undertaking, but this reading threatens to reduce commentary to a merely intellectual exercise with a primary interest in examining and investigating the Buddha's omniscience, of highlighting and cataloguing its salient features. Yet in the world of the Mingun Jetavana, where in the *vimutti khet* modern *vipassanā* meditation can lead one to *arahantship* and the *abhiññās* are still possible in the twentieth century, commentary has an integral role and ultimately active function within

the structure of the Theravada path, which is why the Mingun Jetavana dedicated the first chapter of the Mil-a to outline the attainments of this path in terms of the *abhiññās*. Hence commentary for the Mingun Jetavana is not retroactively orientated towards or subservient to the Buddha's omniscience, it is rather a fundamentally forward-looking project, one meant to enable the continued realization of omniscience or shades thereof in the contemporary practitioner, to bring it forth time and time again in whoever reads the Mil-a and performs the necessary *parikamma*. To the Mingun Jetavana, then, the purpose of writing a commentary like the Mil-a is not just to review or discover the Buddha's qualities, marvel at what came before and lament the lustre lacking in the present. No, for the Mingun Jetavana, commentary is about keeping the omniscience of the Buddha alive, not as a memory or in the imagination, but as something people can access and wield today.

This is why the *abhiññās* are so fundamental to the Mingun Jetavana's project, because they have a teleological force that pulls the reader, inspires them, yes, but also beckons the reader to develop themselves in meditation and strive for if not the *abhiññās*, then *magga-ñāṇa* and *phala-ñāṇa*. Heim is thus right to recognize the link between commentary and omniscience, and for the idea of "Buddhaghosa," exegesis might be primarily a process of recovery and expansion; but for the Mingun Jetavana, writing a millennium and a half later in a vastly different point in *sāsana* history, commentary becomes a process of acting out, renewing, and carrying forward this omniscience, taking control over and becoming it. In essence, then, the Mingun Jetavana dis-attaches the omniscience animating the *sāsana* from the Buddha himself, making it something unique to each age, especially his own *vimutti khet*. This assertively proactive process necessarily means more and more layers of commentary, subcommentary, and so on, an exegetical algorithm that the Mingun Jetavana's Mil-a exemplifies. Such is the reason

why commentary is asymptotically recursive, not because the meaning is not clear in the root text (though this is, of course, true), but because the meaning is being remade continuously and (re)actualized in continuously shifting historical, soteriological, and political conditions.

Answering to these shifting settings is why the concept of the *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ naya* in the Mil-a is so appealing and controversial, since this concept not only allows one to discover hidden or secret meanings kept alive in the Mil since its inception, but it allows for a contemporary commentator to forge their own meaning according to the contingencies of the current age of *sāsana* decline and continuation. In order to claim that he has the ability to recognize and decipher such *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ nayas*, the Mingun Jetavana must assert the possibility of the *abhiññās* in his Mil-a Mil-a, thereby commandeering the omniscience of the Buddha for himself and his own age of *vipassanā* liberation.

Therefore, the Mil-a is ultimately a project meant to not only extrapolate but *act out* the Buddha's omniscience disarticulated from the Buddha himself. Since the *abhiññās* are an essential part of this omniscience and its process of *actualization*, the *abhiññās* are thus integral to the way that the Mingun Jetavana practices commentary. To be more specific, the *abhiññās* are fundamental to the epistemology of the Mil-a. The foundations for this epistemology have been laid down in the *Pubbayogakaṇḍa* by the Mingun Jetavana with reference to the seven *abhiññās*, especially the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa*. This *abhiññā*, along with the *dibbacakkhu-ñāṇa* and the *pubbenivāsa-ñāṇa*, has provided the Mingun Jetavana an alternative way to model and mobilize history. In so doing, he has expanded the parameters and purpose of the *aṭṭhakathā* genre: along with acting as a site for lexical or syntactical analysis, or even for expanding upon the omniscience of the Buddha, this form of commentary enables the linking of the Buddha's past omniscience with the problems and concerns of the present, in such a way as to allow a

contemporary commentator to act on these problems and make the Buddha's enlightenment experience anew. One way to construct this link between the past and present is through the *abhiññās*—not just as imaginative motifs, but as epistemological tools to read the mind of the Buddha and see his vision for the future—our present. Simply put, the *abhiññās* allow for the Mingun Jetavana to radically condense the temporal and spatial distinctions of past, present, and future altogether into a single text. The result is the Mingun Jetavana's formulation of the concept of the *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ naya*, the key to understanding the force of and fierce response to the Mil-a. In the chapter that follows, the Mingun Jetavana makes potent use of this concept, challenging both his monastic peers and the newly independent Burmese government to re-envision the soteriological landscape then being transformed through the practice of *vipassanā* meditation and the presence and possibility of the *abhiññās*.

8 Knowing the Past, Knowing the Future in Debates Around the Reintroduction of Female Ordination in Burma

Introduction

If the *abhiññās* form the epistemological basis of the Mil-a, then in this chapter we will see them put into action by the Mingun Jetavana. In perhaps the most controversial section of his text, the commentator puts forward his call for the full ordination of women and promotes the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* (“the order of nuns”) in twentieth-century Burma, possibly eight centuries after their disappearance. To make his case, the Mingun Jetavana reverse engineers his interpretation of the pronouncements of the Buddha on this issue with the concept of the *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ nayas*, a concept rooted in the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa* seen in the last chapter. By invoking this concept and its animating *abhiññā*, the Mingun Jetavana is trying to transcend the conservative Theravada legalist argument for why women can no longer become *bhikkhunīs*, deploying a reverse prolepsis where the Buddha has purposefully embedded future flexibility in the Vinayaṭaka that attends specifically to the conditions of the present, a flexibility into which the Mingun Jetavana claims special access. It is thus not just the actual reforms the Mingun Jetavana is calling for that caused uproar amongst the monastic elite and the U Nu administration but the fact that the Mingun Jetavana reserves such special access for himself, in effect appropriating the right to reinterpret the exclusive canon then being reinforced and standing in for the Buddha in an age of *sāsana* decline.

To lay out the context in which the Mingun Jetavana was writing, I will begin this chapter by presenting the conservative argument against reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, briefly

discussing the liminal status of non-ordained, female ascetics in twentieth-century Burma and how the rise of the mass lay meditation movement has transformed the soteriological potential for both women and men. Yet despite this new horizon for female practitioners, there is still resistance to their *upasampadā* (“higher ordination”) as *bhikkhunīs*, a position epitomized by elite scholastic monks like Ashin Nandamālābhivamsa, who believes that it is a de facto impossibility given the absence of a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* today and the requirement that women be ordained by both female and male monastics. While Ashin Nandamālābhivamsa and other conservative Theravada legalists put forward their objections to female ordination as the most literal reading of the pronouncements of the Buddha recorded in the Vinayaṭīka, the argument of the Mingun Jetavana in favour of female ordination, tackled in the next section, is based on the same set of texts. Covering 11 pages in his commentary on the *Meṇḍakapañha* in the root text, the Mingun Jetavana proposes that women can be ordained by monks alone until a quorum is reached and the two-sided method involving monks and nuns is possible. I point out that this argument rests on the Mingun Jetavana’s distinction between two types of regulation laid down by the Buddha, root regulations (P. *mūla-paññattī*) and supplementary regulations (P. *anupaññattī*). My purpose in analysing the Mingun Jetavana’s proposal here is to demonstrate that this distinction only makes sense if one takes the Buddha to have known the future, for according to the commentator, the supplementary regulation concerning the higher ordination of nuns (P. *bhikkhunī-upasampadā*) was meant to apply precisely in the current historical moment—in the absence of a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* that could fulfil the requirements of a two-side ordination. Yet what right does the Mingun Jetavana claim to discern the nature and function of this supplementary regulation? According to him and his disciples, the Mingun Jetavana was a

buddhamataññū (“one who knows the intention of the Buddha”).³⁶⁸ With this status, the Mingun Jetavana invokes the supreme commentarial conceit, understanding the Buddha as addressing him directly through the Mil and outside millennia of accrued local tradition.

In the second half of this chapter, I turn to the figure of Adiccavamsa, first introduced in Chapter One. Like the Mingun Jetavana, Adiccavamsa argued for the higher ordination of women in his 1935 book, *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa* (ဘိက္ခုနီသာသနောပဒေသ *Instruction on the Sāsana of Nuns*) (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935), first discussed in Chapter Six. While the details of their arguments are roughly the same and likely developed in unison, Adiccavamsa does not rely on his own special access into the rationale of the Buddha, but rather insists upon the consistency of the Buddha’s enactment and revocation of regulations while also putting forth a creative reading of the timeline of *sāsana* decline. Indeed, perhaps more controversial than his call to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* was his belief that the Buddha’s teaching could last longer than the 5000-year limit sanctioned by the Pali commentaries and accepted by the monastic hierarchy of early twentieth-century Burma. According to Adiccavamsa, the longevity of the *sāsana* is not predetermined but contingent on the commitment to practice by both male and female monastics, alluding to the concept of the *vimutti khet* introduced in Chapter Six. Hence my contention in this section is that Adiccavamsa’s motivation to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* was not just a liberal commitment to gender equality, but a recognition of the fact that women too were capable of reaching penultimate stages and even the ultimate stage of enlightenment in this age of *vipassanā*. My reason for bringing Adiccavamsa into this chapter is to highlight that this same

³⁶⁸ The term *buddhamataññū* also appears in the *Milinda-ṭīkā* (Mil-ṭ 15,¹³) to describe Nāgasena, showing the equivalency set up between Nāgasena and the Mingun Jetavana by the latter’s disciples.

line of thought motivated the argument of the Mingun Jetavana, a pioneer in the very movement that was transforming the role of women in the *sāsana*. What is critical is that both authors rely on the Mil and its newly minted canonical status to make their cases, for the dilemmatic question arises in this root text about the ability of a lay person to survive if they reach the stage of *arahantship* without renouncing the householder life, an especially acute problem for women who do not have recourse to higher ordination. The thrust of this chapter is therefore that the Mingun Jetavana’s attempt to revive the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* should be seen as a direct response to this dilemmatic question and part of a broader project, that of legitimizing the soteriological landscape opened up by the mass lay meditation movement in the age of *vipassanā* liberation.

8.1 Conservative Argument Against

In contemporary Burma there are several layers of distinction used to demarcate the proximity of one person or group to the centre of the Buddha’s *sāsana*. In the broadest division, fully ordained male monastics (P. *bhikkhu*, ဘုန်းကြီး: *bhunḥ krīḥ*) are considered “inside the *sāsana*” (သာသနာဝင် *sāsanā vaṅ*) (Houtman 1990a, 120), literally, in the “lineage of the *sāsana*,” since their role is to protect, promulgate, and realize these teachings through scriptural learning, the pursuit of moral perfection, and the practice of meditation. Everyone else falls outside. Since the community of nuns (P. *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*) is said to have died out in what is now Burma sometime in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries (Falk and Kawanami 2017, 40),³⁶⁹ women are

³⁶⁹ Htat Htay Lwin surveys in her dissertation epigraphic evidence from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries in Bagan that lists the names of several *bhikkhunīs* alongside prominent *bhikkhus* (Htay Htay Lwin 2013, 10-12). In the late thirteenth century, a series of (possible) Mongol invasions, “highly destructive Shan incursions,” unchecked growth in tax-free religious wealth, the end of the “Medieval Climate Anomaly,” and a shifting in maritime trade networks began to unravel the political centre of Bagan (Lieberman 2003, 119-123). As a result, Buddhism entered what Htay Htay Lwin calls a “Dark Age,” during which time members of the *saṅgha* struggled to survive without

without a current pathway to higher ordination (P. *upasampadā*, ရဟန်းခံ *ra hanḥ kham*). They are thus “axiomatically excluded” from being insiders (Jordt 2005, 44). As preceptor renunciants, or *thilashin* in Burmese (သီလရှင် *sīla rhan*), they do however occupy an elevated position compared to ordinary laypeople as “those carrying out duties for the *sāsana*” (သာသနာဝန်ထမ်း *sāsanā van thamḥ*) (Houtman 1990a, 121). These *thilashin*, like the *mae chi* in Thailand or the *dasa sil mata* in Sri Lanka, occupy a liminal status somewhere in-between homelessness and the domestic sphere, taking eight or 10 precepts of higher moral action, shaving their heads, donning robes, and pursuing a “noble celibacy” (Jordt 2005, 44) while also handling money and preparing food for themselves or their male monastic patrons (Jordt 2005, 45). In a conservative reading, then, the closest to the *sāsana*’s centre a woman can aspire is to take up the life of a *thilashin* while sponsoring the novitiate ceremony of her son, thus becoming an “inheritor of Buddhism” (သာသနာမွေ *sāsanā mve*) (Houtman 1990a, 121) twice over and a heavily invested supporter of the religion. This orthodox interpretation does not prevent women in Burma from striving to develop the *thilashin* vocation into a parallel institution of “the *sangha* with the hopes of reproducing in shadow form the function of the earlier *bhikkhunī* order” (Jordt 2005, 44). They have even gained recognition by “the Department of Religious Affairs and receive identification documents and legal exemptions similar to those received by

centralized political support (Htay Htay Lwin 2013, 14). Though not much is known about the presence or absence of *bhikkhunīs* during this period of fragmentation, the implication is that they disappeared from the territory now called “Burma” as a result of these large-scale changes and political upheaval. Bhikkhu Anālayo, referring to similar political circumstances in South Asia, asserts that the *bhikkhunī-sāsana* disappeared after the eleventh century “when during a period of political turmoil the entire monastic community in Sri Lanka was decimated. To the best of our knowledge, at that time no *bhikkhunīs* were in existence elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia” (Anālayo 2017, 9). This statement, however, does not disaggregate the situation between the two regions, with the exact timing or circumstances of the *bhikkhunī-sangha*’s disappearance in Burma unknown at present. With the appearance of “*thilashin*” and similar titles in the historical record after the thirteenth century, it is possible there was not so much an “extinction” as a gradual transition from the state of *bhikkhunī* to a more ambiguous status as semi- or non-ordained female renunciants.

monks” (Schonthal 2017, xx–xxi).³⁷⁰ Yet given their disproportional access to the merit economy of Burma and conventionally thought to be lacking *bhunḥ* (ဘုၼ်) the “innate spiritual superiority acquired through accumulated merit,” or the *puñña* (“merit”) thought to be the monopoly of men (Harriden 2012, 7),³⁷¹ the best Burmese women have been able to create through the institution of the *thilashin* is a simulacrum of the extinct order of nuns and the extant assembly of monks.

The standard rationale for designating an individual or group as “inside” or “outside” the *sāsana* has come under considerable strain over the last century, as what Gustaaf Houtman calls “performative criteria” have arisen redefining how people manifest and realize their relationship to Buddhism in Burma (Houtman 1990a, 123). As charismatic individuals like the Ledi (introduced in Chapter Four) popularized scriptural learning among women and “even girls [...] with little prior training in Buddhist philosophy” (Braun 2013, 105), the monopoly of textual training previously enjoyed by monks or educated men is no longer absolute. In terms of *paṭipatti*, the practice of the Buddha’s teachings, the rise of insight, or *vipassanā* meditation in the first half of the twentieth century and its extraordinary spread among the lay population meant that, in the words of Ingrid Jordt, “people from all walks of life [could] engage en masse in the penultimate training leading to the stage of enlightenment” (Jordt 2005, 43–44). With the advent of the “mass lay meditation movement” (Jordt 2007), the role of lay people in the

³⁷⁰ For more on the legal status of *thilashins* and their Thai counterparts, see Monica Lindberg Falk and Hiroko Kawanami (2017).

³⁷¹ Given the relationship between *bhunḥ*, *āṇā*, and *ojā* (concepts referenced in the introduction), the perceived lack of *bhunḥ* among women means that in practice, women “are generally excluded” from or discouraged from seeking political power (Harriden 2012, 7), since they are unable to develop charisma and their own spheres of influence (i.e. *ojā*), and thus cannot exercise power through institutions and force (i.e. *āṇā*), or at least, not with the same legitimacy afforded by *ojā*. Houtman, however, argues that given her undeniable political influence in Burma, especially after 1988, Aung San Suu Kyi possesses *ojā*, which has an especially Buddhist resonance to it (Houtman 1990a, 170–71), raising interesting questions about her relationship to *bhunḥ* as well.

perpetuation and realization of the Buddha's *sāsana* has undergone profound transformation. This transformation is especially pronounced for women, who make up a preponderance of those undertaking *vipassanā* practice. It was in this context that some women began to agitate for a renewed responsibility within the *sāsana* itself, such as the nun Saccavādī, known in Burmese as Ma Thissawaddy (Kawanami 2007, 232), in the early 2000s. After passing some of the most elite scriptural exams in Burma, Saccavādī travelled to Sri Lanka to obtain a master's degree in Buddhist Studies, becoming "involved in the movement to reinstate the *bhikkhunīs* as it unfolded" in real time on the island (Kawanami 2007, 232). Eventually she received a dual ordination (*P. ubhato-saṅghe upasampadā*) from both sides of the *saṅgha*, with her *upasampadā* ceremony overseen by "12 monks from different countries led by [Talalle] Dhammāloka" from Sri Lanka and "12 *bhikkhunī* born in Sri Lanka led by Khemācārī" (Janaka Ashin 2016, 206). When Saccavādī re-entered Burma, she was "summoned by the monastic authorities for questioning" in May 2005 and imprisoned for blasphemy under sections 295 and 295(a) of the criminal code, ostensibly for undressing before the state-backed monastic council (*Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka*) after being made to change out of her brown *bhikkhunī* robes (Kawanami 2007, 233–34). This landmark and contentious case came to be known as the "Bhikkhunī Bhāvābhāva Vinicchaya" (Janaka Ashin 2016, 206), or the "Judgement on the Existence or Non-Existence of Nuns."

Writing in 2015 about this attempt to revive the order of nuns in the twenty-first century, Ashin Nandamālābhivaṃsa, the rector of the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University and a high-ranking member of the country's ecclesiastical hierarchy, represents the contemporary legalist position of senior monks in Burma, stating that

[a]t one time, the question about the possibility of the revival of *Bhikkhunī-sāsana* was widely discussed in the midst of *Saṅgha* in Myanmar. Some people might still remember

this episode. [...] In the idea of some people, there was another way to revive *Bhikkhunī-sāsana*. A bhikkhunī-aspirant went to the side of Chinese *Mahāyāna Bhikkhunī* to get bhikkhunī ordination as the first step; they obtained second ordination from the *Theravāda* monks as the second step. So, this form of “hybrid” dual ordination of *Mahāyāna bhikkunī* and *Theravāda bhikkhus* started in India and the number of bhikkhunīs in Sri Lanka is more than hundreds now. (Nandamālābhivamsa 2015, 29)

What Ashin Nandamālābhivamsa is describing is the method followed by Saccavādī, whose preceptors were Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs* ordained by Taiwanese nuns in Bodhgaya, India, in 1998 (Ashiwa 2015, 19).³⁷² Yet for Ashin Nandamālābhivamsa, the “bhikkhunīs ordained by this ‘hybrid’ [...] *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* method are not real Theravada bhikkhunī in the viewpoint of *Theravāda*” (Nandamālābhivamsa 2015, 29). As Burmese monastic scholar Janaka Ashin explains, the argument here is that the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya lineage maintained by these Taiwanese or Korean preceptors and passed on to their Sri Lankan initiates was “in some way contaminated because of the Mahāyāna beliefs of those who follow them” (Janaka Ashin 2016, 206), an argument that belies the strict neo-conservative self-image carefully crafted by elite monks in Burma (Janaka Ashin 2016, 208). Ashin Nandamālābhivamsa demonstrates this conservative self-identification when he stresses that

Myanmar Sayadaws (senior monks) who follow strictly the treatises of *Pāḷi* (original text), *aṭṭhakathā* (commentaries) and *ṭīkā* (sub-commentaries) do not accept this new *Bhikkhunī-sāsana* because bhikkhunī ordination is not possible anymore. The impossibility for new bhikkhunī ordination is due to the disappearance and non-existence of the *Bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. If there is a *Bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, then there is a possibility for bhikkhunī ordination. According to the Vinaya rules, a candidate should obtain ordination from *Bhikkhunī-saṅgha* for the first time and then ordination from *Bhikkhu-saṅgha* for the second time. That means, the candidate should obtain the ordination from both *saṅghas*. As there is no more *Bhikkhunī-saṅgha* anymore, bhikkhunī ordination is impossible. (Nandamālābhivamsa 2015, 28–29)

³⁷² There was also an earlier ordination ceremony in Sarnath, India, in December of 1996, “when ten Sri Lankan women were ordained as bhikkhunīs by Sri Lankan monks from the Mahābodhi Society assisted by Korean monks and nuns” (Bodhi 2010, 99).

While offering his sympathy for the plight of female renunciants in Burma, Ashin Nandamālābhivaṃsa is essentially externalizing the decision, reducing it to a matter of immutable scriptural fact. His claim that the “impossibility for new bhikkhunī ordination is due to the disappearance and non-existence of the *Bhikkhunī-saṅgha*” essentially invalidates the existence of *bhikkhunīs* in other Buddhist countries, meaning he denies the validity of those who tried to “transplant” or “repurpose” the lineages of other Vinayapiṭakas into the Theravāda context. By thus denying the validity of these “Chinese Mahāyāna lineages,” Ashin Nandamālābhivaṃsa reveals his own neoconservative, literalist interpretation of Theravāda Buddhism and the concept of the exclusive canon on which it relies. My aim here is not to pass judgement on this position or assess its relative merits or accuracy,³⁷³ yet by extending our historical scope to the first half of the twentieth century, we will see that the existence or non-existence of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* is not so much a matter of scriptural record, but like so many other issues of *vinaya* orthodoxy, contingent on scriptural interpretation influenced by the accretion of local tradition and hermeneutics. As American born monk Bhikkhu Bodhi emphasizes on this point, “Theravāda jurisprudence often merges stipulations on legal issues that stem from the canonical Vinaya texts, the *aṭṭhakathās* (commentaries), and the *ṭīkās* (subcommentaries) with interpretations of these stipulations that have gained currency through centuries of tradition” (Bodhi 2010, 116). Acting against, or rather, beyond this tradition, the Mingun Jetavana interpreted the Vinayapiṭaka and its commentaries in a fashion diametrically

³⁷³ For this type of assessment, see Anālayo (2017), who argues that this view held by conservative legalists in Burma and elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia does not attend to the narrative logic of the Vinayapiṭaka, and thus implies a degree of carelessness by the Buddha when laying down the different rules behind *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* (Anālayo 2017, 21). In this article, Anālayo assumes a “legal reading” himself (2017, 13), thereby arguing against this view on the same terms as someone like Ashin Nandamālābhivaṃsa. This is not the approach I am taking here, as I am instead trying to understand the historiography of different interpretations of the Vinayapiṭaka on this issue, without debating the admittedly important details of the Vinayapiṭaka itself.

opposed to the position of conservative Theravada legalists, using his own self-proclaimed special insight as a *vipassanā* teacher and Pali commentator to argue that the Buddha actually intended his words to be used to re-establish the order of nuns. It is to this advocacy by the Mingun Jetavana that we now turn.

8.2 The Mingun Jetavana's Argument For

The point in the root text at which the Mingun Jetavana chooses to make his intervention around the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* is in a dilemmatic, two-pronged question (P. *ubhato-koṭṭika pañha*) in the *Meṇḍakapañhakaṇḍa* (*Chapter of Questions on the Ram*) concerning the longevity of the *sāsana*, a perennially debated question in the history of Theravada Buddhism. In the Mil, King Milinda asks Nāgasena about an apparent contradiction between two statements made by the Buddha concerning the duration of his teachings: in the *Cullavagga* of the Vinayapiṭaka, it is said that the *sāsana* as both a path to nirvana and an institution facilitating progress on this path will only last 500 years, which stands in contrast to a statement in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (*Discourse on the Great Complete Nirvana*) recounting the Buddha's final months, where, "in response to the question put by Subhadda the recluse," the Buddha replies that "if in this system the [monks] live the perfect life, then the world will not be bereft of *arahants*" (Mil trans. Rhys Davids [1890] 1963, I:186). The first statement, as Nāgasena explains, is in reference to the Buddha's decision to admit women into the *saṅgha* as *bhikkhunīs*, where he predicts that as a result of permitting female ordination, the *sāsana* will last half as long, from 1000 to 500 years.³⁷⁴

³⁷⁴ It is worth noting, as Bhikkhunī Kusuma points out, that "[n]owhere except in the *Cullavagga* is there any indication that the decline of the Buddha's teachings would occur as a result of the institution of the *bhikkhunī* order" (Kusuma 2000, 10), while even Buddhaghosa obliquely disagrees in his comment on this passage, eventually

After explaining Nāgasena’s resolution of this *prima facie* dilemma, which dismisses the apparent contradiction by clarifying that the first statement refers to the temporal range of the *sāsana*, while the second statement was made in the context of the “actual practice of the religious life” (Mil trans. Rhys Davids [1890] 1963, I:186), the Mingun Jetavana pivots to invoke the epistemology of the *abhiññās*, asking “[b]ut in regard to this question [about the disappearance of the *sāsana*], this method is handed down to future monks. What is this method handed down to future monks?”³⁷⁵ In posing this rhetorical question, the Mingun Jetavana directly intervenes in the received understanding of the Mil, asserting that there is a concealed, almost esoteric interpretation of the root text that Nāgasena does not make explicit but which a skilled and realized commentator can decipher. In answering his own question, the Mingun Jetavana sets up a juxtaposition with two statements by the Buddha found in the Vinaya-piṭaka around the ordination of women: the first is “I allow, o *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs* to be ordained by *bhikkhus*,”³⁷⁶ the second statement is “a female undergoing a probationary course (*sikkhamānā*) who has been trained in the six *dhammas* for two rains is to seek ordination from both orders.”³⁷⁷

extending the age of the *sāsana* to 5000 years. For his part, Anālayo claims that it is “probable” that this statement “originated as part of the narrative regarding the convocation of the first *saṅgīti*,” or mass recitation of the Pāli texts, which was convened because of an anxiety about the future viability of the *sāsana* (Anālayo 2017, 11). He goes on to suggest that over “the course of the transmission of the texts,” this negative sentiment in regard to the initial establishment of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* was “turned into statements made by the Buddha himself” (Anālayo 2017, 11).

³⁷⁵ *ayaṃ pana imasmiṃ ca pañhe anāgatabhikkhūnaṃ nayo dinno nāma hoti/ ko esa anāgatabhikkhūnaṃ dinnanayo nāma* (Mil-a 195,⁷⁻⁸). Though all translations are my own unless stated otherwise, a translation of the section on reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in the Mil-a was also made by Bhikkhu Bodhi as an appendix to his 2010 article, pages 135-142, which I did not use for my initial translation, but I have found his footnotes helpful in trying to understand some of the more obscure passages.

³⁷⁶ *anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetuṃ* (Mil-a 195,⁸⁻⁹). The Mingun Jetavana takes this quote from Vin II 257,⁷⁻⁸.

³⁷⁷ *dve vassāni chasu dhammesu sikkhitasikkhāya sikkhamānāya ubhatosāṅghe upasampadā pariyesitabbā* (Mil-a 195,⁹⁻¹¹). The Mingun Jetavana takes this quote from Vin II 255,¹⁹⁻²⁰.

The first statement refers to the ordination of 500 “Sākyan” women from the royal court of the Buddha’s father, who were admitted into the *saṅgha* through a ceremony overseen only by monks after Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha’s maternal aunt and stepmother, accepted the eight “heavy rules” (P. *garudhammas*) of respect towards *bhikkhus*, thereby becoming the first *bhikkhunī*. The second statement refers to the sixth *garudhamma* itself, which was a prerequisite for Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī’s own ordination and which tradition has taken to apply to all subsequent *bhikkhunīs* as well. According to the sixth *garudhamma*, in order to enter into this probationary period, the female candidate must first be granted permission by the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*.³⁷⁸ While it is true that in the absence of such a *saṅgha*, a woman cannot even embark on this preliminary stage to becoming a *bhikkhunī*, it is further stipulated in the sixth *garudhamma* that a female probationer must seek ordination from both orders, meaning first the *bhikkhunī*- and then the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*. The inability to meet these two criteria of the sixth *garudhamma* is considered a major barrier to ordaining women as *bhikkhunīs* in the present age. But for the Mingun Jetavana, the real problem is that monks alive today consider these statements to be mutually exclusive. The apparent juxtaposition here is that either women are to be ordained by the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* alone, or by both the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* and the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*, but that both scenarios cannot be valid at the same historical moment.

³⁷⁸ Anālayo points out that after comparison with texts from other *vinaya* lineages, this particular *garudhamma* appears to have “gone through a change of wording,” especially because the “reference to both communities is not found in all versions,” with some extant sources mentioning only the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* (Anālayo 2017, 12). The historical layering of these rules is no doubt an important point, but not one considered by the Mingun Jetavana when making his own argument in the Mil-a.

The Mingun Jetavana’s purpose in setting up this juxtaposition is to show that these two statements “do not correspond in meaning,”³⁷⁹ in other words, that they are not mutually exclusive, but rather, both point in their own way to the underlying intention of the speaker, namely, that “with respect to the two utterances the meaning is shown in each case just that a woman is to be ordained.”³⁸⁰ What the commentator is doing in this instance is actually setting up his own dilemmatic, two-pronged question, effectively emulating the Mil. Taking on the role of the interrogator of the root text, King Milinda, the Mingun Jetavana writes the following:

[According to] one [view], the woman who is to be ordained is to be ordained by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*. [According to] another [view], the woman to be ordained is to be ordained by both [the female and male] *saṅgha*. Future *bhikkhus* holding such wrong views, having seized on a particular meaning for the sake of explaining their wrong views, [will say] according to their opinion, “O Friend, if it was said by the Tathāgata, ‘I allow, o *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs* to be ordained by *bhikkhus*,’ with this utterance, the utterance [also spoken by the Tathāgata] ‘A female undergoing a probationary course (*sikkhamānā*) who has been trained in the six dhammas for two rains is to seek ordination from both orders’ [should be considered] wrong.”³⁸¹

In this quote, the Mingun Jetavana is describing future monks, future, that is, to the Buddha, meaning he is indirectly calling out his contemporaries. Their views are “wrong” (P. *micchā*) in so far as they are claiming for the exclusivity of one utterance by the Buddha in contrast to the other (e.g., *yam vacanaṃ, tam micchā*). In the next part of this passage, the Mingun Jetavana writes that other future monks may say, in contrast to the first position, that

“if it was said by the Tathāgata ‘a female undergoing a probationary course (*sikkhamānā*) who has been trained in the six dhammas for two rains is to seek ordination from both

³⁷⁹ *atthe na ppavattati* (Mil-a 195,¹⁴)

³⁸⁰ *dvinnamaṃ vacanānaṃ attho ekenekena vacanena dīpito upasampādetabbamātugāmo yeva hoti* (Mil-a 195,¹⁸⁻¹⁹)

³⁸¹ *eko upasampādetabbamātugāmo bhikkhusaṅghena upasampādetabbo/ eko upasampādetabbamātugāmo ubhatosaṅghena upasampādetabbo ti micchāvādīnaṃ micchāvādātipanattaṃ tesam adhippāyaṃ gahetvā anāgatabhikkhūnaṃ matena yadi panāvuso tathāgatena bhaṇitaṃ anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhuniyo upasampādetuṃ ti/ tena hi dve vassāni chasu dhammesu sikkhitasikkhāya sikkhamānāya ubhatosaṅghe upasampadā pariyesitabbā ti yaṃ vacanaṃ/ taṃ micchā* (Mil-a 195,¹⁹⁻²⁶). This translation was, admittedly, quite difficult, hence I relied on Bhikkhu Bodhi’s work when necessary.

orders,’ indeed according to this [statement], [the Tathāgata’s] utterance ‘I allow, o bhikkhus, bhikkhunīs to be ordained by bhikkhus,’ is likewise wrong.”³⁸²

As the Mingun Jetavana has framed the issue of *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* above, there are essentially two positions espoused by future monks:

Is it not then that a two-sided ordination has been prohibited [by the statement] that a woman should be ordained by the one[-sided] *bhikkhu-saṅgha*? [Likewise, is it not then] that a one[-sided] ordination by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* is prohibited for a woman [by the statement] that a women should be ordained by the two-fold *saṅgha*? Therefore, one [statement] prohibits the other, [for] one [view of future monks] is that a women should be ordained by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*, another [view of future monks] is that a women should be ordained by the two-fold *saṅgha* [of both men and women], this is as such a two-pronged question (*ubhato-koṭiko*).³⁸³

Hence either ordination by one side of the *saṅgha* (i.e., *bhikkhus* ordaining *bhikkhunīs*) is permitted, negating other options, or dual ordination is permitted, carried out first by *bhikkhunīs* then sanctioned *bhikkhus*, thereby invalidating the one-sided option. The former method is that which was carried out for the 500 Sākyan women who followed Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and is one means proposed by those wishing to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*; the second method,³⁸⁴ where the ordination ceremony is essentially carried out twice, first by *bhikkhunīs*, then by *bhikkhus*, is the preferred means prescribed by Theravada tradition. Indeed, as Bodhi reminds us, “[f]rom the time the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* reached maturity until it demise, the dual-*saṅgha* ordination was regarded in Theravada countries as mandatory” (Bodhi 2010, 106). Such a binary framing,

³⁸² *yadi tathāgatena bhaṇitam/ taṃ dve vassāni chasu dhammesu sikkhitasikkhāya sikkhamānāya ubhatosaṅghe upasampadā pariyesitabbā ti/ tenahi anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetuṃ ti/ taṃ pi vacanaṃ micchā* (Mil-a 195,²⁶⁻³⁰)

³⁸³ *nanu upasampādetabbamātugāmaṃ upasampāditena ekena bhikkhusaṅghena upasampādito ubhatosaṅgho paṭisedhito/ upasampādetabbamātugāmaṃ upasampāditena ekena ubhatosaṅghena upasampādetabbamātugāmaṃ upasampādito eko bhikkhusaṅgho paṭisedhito/ iti aññamaññaṃ paṭisedho upasampādetabbamātugāmaṃ upasampādito bhikkhusaṅgho eko/ upasampādetabbamātugāmaṃ upasampādito ubhatosaṅgho eko ti evamayaṃ ubhatokoṭiko pañho* (Mil-a 195,^{30-196,1}). For this passage too I found Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation very helpful.

³⁸⁴ This second method is called “ordination through eight proclamations (*aṭṭhavācīkūpasampadā*)” because the process involved an initial “motion and three proclamations” first by the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*, followed by one motion and three proclamations by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*, making for a total of eight “acts” in the entire process (Bodhi 2010, 104).

however, is deliberately simplistic on the part of the Mingun Jetavana, for in the spirit of the Mil, the role of Nāgasena is to demonstrate that the two-pronged questions put forth by Milinda are in fact fallacious (*S. ābhāsa*) either because the apparent “alternatives are not [really] opposed to each other” or because “the predicates of the alternative propositions are repugnant to our logical sense” (Solomon 1976, 1:508). Hence the key to overcoming such a dilemma is to reveal that there is ultimately no conflict between the two statements, crucial in this case since both are spoken by the Buddha—held to be incapable of contradictory statements by all parties in this debate.

According to the Mingun Jetavana, the inability of monks to “answer and analyze this two-pronged question at present”³⁸⁵ causes some of his co-religionists to argue for the exclusivity of these duelling positions, without realizing that both statements can be true under different circumstances. In pointing out these circumstances, the Mingun Jetavana writes that “in this matter we state: the Blessed one said, ‘I allow, *o bhikkhus*, the *bhikkhunīs* to be ordained by *bhikkhus*.’ And that utterance of the Blessed One is a resolution (*pariccheda*) because of the non-existence of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*.”³⁸⁶ In other words, the reason why this regulation was initially laid down by the Buddha is because at that time, at that inchoate moment in the history of the *sāsana*, there was no *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, an extenuating circumstance necessitating the single-sided ordination of the 500 Sākyan women by *bhikkhus* alone. Simply put, there was no other way to bring them into the *saṅgha* and fulfill the Buddha’s (purportedly reluctant) wish. In contrast, for the Mingun Jetavana, the second statement pertaining to the two-year training

³⁸⁵ *ubhatokoṭīkaṃ pañhaṃ etarahi vissajjetuñceva vibhajjetuñca asakkuṇeyyānaṃ* (Mil-a 196,¹⁻²)

³⁸⁶ *tattha vadāma/ anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetuṃ ti etaṃ vacanaṃ bhagavatā bhāsitaṃ/ tañca pana bhagavato vacanaṃ ayaṃ bhikkhunīsāṅghassa abhāvapāricchedo* (Mil-a 196,⁹⁻¹¹)

period of any prospective *bhikkhunī* is a regulation referring to “the practice of the female novice,”³⁸⁷ the normal course of progress for a trainee under ideal conditions. Put another way, the first statement is about the evolution of the *sāsana* in time, while the second statement is about “a two-stage *procedure* for dual ordination” (Anālayo 2017, 18) (emphasis added).³⁸⁸ Hence just as Nāgasena’s resolution of the two statements about the longevity of the *sāsana* (concerning its 500-year span in contrast to the Buddha’s reply to Subhadda), the first statement allowing monks to ordain nuns is for the Mingun Jetavana temporal in nature, one contingent on historical circumstances, while the second statement about candidates for ordination first seeking permission from the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* to enter the two-year training period refers to the actual practice and proceedings of the spiritual life, one that assumes all other attendant conditions have been met, such as the existence of a contemporaneous *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*.³⁸⁹ The Mingun Jetavana has thus mapped this same relationship between the two statements in the root text onto the contemporary issue of re-ordaining women as *bhikkhunīs*, such that in his analysis of the two-pronged question, “one [regulation] is far away from the other. One is not shared with the other. One is not mixed with the other.”³⁹⁰ With the correct analysis, then, there is no contradiction at all.

³⁸⁷ *sikkhamānāya paṭipatti* (Mil-a 196,¹²)

³⁸⁸ Anālayo’s point here is that the sixth *garudhamma* is not actually “about dual ordination as such, but much rather about a two-stage procedure in conducting dual ordination (Anālayo 2017, 19). He therefore sees the addition of the stipulation that prospective candidates for *upasampadā* first seek permission from a *bhikkhunī* as “an amendment to the basic procedure described in *garudhamma* 6” (Anālayo 2017, 19).

³⁸⁹ As Anālayo explains, the idea of certain rules being contingent on conditions is not unprecedented for *bhikkhunī-upasampadā*. Another extenuating circumstance involves a situation where a female candidate cannot safely travel to seek ordination from the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*, as stipulated in the sixth *garudhamma*; in such a case, she may send a messenger in her stead (Anālayo 2017, 20).

³⁹⁰ *ārakā aññena añño/ añño aññena asādhāraṇo/ añño aññena asammisso* (Mil-a 196,¹⁹⁻²⁰)

The key to understanding the Mingun Jetavana’s strategy here is in recognizing that for him, these statements represent two distinct forms of regulation laid down by the Buddha. The regulation invoked by the Mingun Jetavana that comes first in the sequence of events is the sixth *garudhamma*, where a female novice must undertake a two-year probationary period sanctioned by other *bhikkhunīs*. According to the Mingun Jetavana, this stipulation is known as a “root regulation” (P. *mūla-paññatti*) that was forward looking in nature. It is “forward looking” insofar as it was meant for the *bhikkhunīs-to-be*, because when Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī accepted it along with the other seven *garudhammas*, the conditions could not possibly be met, as there was then no *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* that could sanction a candidate’s status as a probationer or ordain her after the two-year training. Indeed, for the Mingun Jetavana, the “eight important rules for the *bhikkhunī* [Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī] were spoken [as a whole], made known to the not-yet-arisen *bhikkhunīs* with the status of a root regulation.”³⁹¹ As a result of this situation, when it came time for the 500 Sākyan women to be ordained, the Buddha made what the Mingun Jetavana considers a “supplementary rule” (P. *anupaññatti*), one meant to apply in cases where the root regulations could not be honoured because of extenuating circumstances. In this case, the circumstance was the fact that there was at that time no *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* that the 500 Sākyan women could turn to, so in order to ensure their ordination, the Buddha “made known [a rule] with the status of a supplementary regulation, saying ‘I allow, o *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs* to be ordained by *bhikkhus*.’³⁹² According to this reading, the two rules do not negate each other, but are complementary and meant to apply in distinct historical contexts.

³⁹¹ *aṭṭha garudhammā bhikkhuniyā anuppannāya bhikkhunīnaṃ mūlapaññattibhāvena paññattā* (Mil-a 197,¹²⁻¹³)

³⁹² *anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetuṃ ti anupaññattibhāvo [...] paññatto* (Mil-a 197,²²⁻²⁴)

Though it might seem a subtle distinction to us, for the Mingun Jetavana, this is a crucial point, as “this supplementary regulation did not achieve the state of being universal[ly applicable] (*sādhāraṇabhāvaṃ*) in regards to both sanction[s] and injunction[s] declared [by the Buddha] before and after [this secondary regulation was enacted].”³⁹³ What the Mingun Jetavana means here is that the ordination of *bhikkhunīs* by *bhikkhus* did not become a root regulation but was only valid under special conditions, never having been outright revoked by the Buddha nor generally applied. In other words, this supplementary regulation in no way conflicts with the other root regulations around *bhikkhunī-upasampadā*, but is designed only for special circumstances, according to which its relevance is “activated.” As Bodhi also stresses on this point,

[t]here is nothing in the text itself, or elsewhere in the Pāli Vinaya, that lays down a rule stating categorically that, should the *bhikkhunī* saṅgha become extinct, the *bhikkhus* are prohibited from falling back on the original allowance the Buddha gave them to ordain *bhikkhunīs* and confer *upasampadā* on their own to resuscitate the *bhikkhunī* saṅgha. (Bodhi 2010, 123)

Instead, it has become traditionally accepted in Theravada circles that this supplementary rule no longer applies, a localized interpretation that the Mingun Jetavana is trying to dispute by his reading of the *Vinayaṭṭakā*.³⁹⁴ When responding to a contemporary peer questioning his

³⁹³ *esā pana anupaññatti pure ceva pacchā ca paññattena paṭikkhepenā pi anuññātenāpi sādhāraṇabhāvaṃ na pāpuṇi* (Mil-a 197,²⁴⁻²⁶). Bhikkhu Bodhi offers the following translation for this crucial sentence: “But this secondary regulation did not reach a condition where it shared [validity] with any prior and subsequent prohibition and allowance that had been laid down” (2010, 138). He adds in a footnote to this somewhat cryptic passage that “[t]he purport seems to be that this authorization is valid only as long as the Buddha does not issue another decree that implicitly annuls its validity, such as that stipulating a dual-saṅgha ordination” (2010, 138–39). Taking Bhikkhu Bodhi’s instincts here further, my interpretation above, made with other biographical information about the Mingun Jetavana’s position, is that this supplementary rule, not having been explicitly annulled, is in effect as long as the Buddha’s *sāsana* remains, despite being dismissed or neglected by localized layers of legalistic interpretation.

³⁹⁴ Anālayo suggests that part of this entrenched interpretation stems from a reading of the *Dīpavaṃsa* in the episode where Mahinda brings Buddhism to the island of Lanka. When the ruler of the island at the time beseeched Mahinda “to grant ordination to the queen and her followers, Mahinda replied that it is not possible for a *bhikkhu* to do so” (Anālayo 2017, 22). According to Anālayo, Mahinda’s “statement was correct, since *bhikkhunīs* were in existence” back on the South Asian subcontinent, but it is mistake, claims Anālayo, to assert the relevance of this

position on the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, the Mingun Jetavana reaffirms his view above, emphasising that the “supplementary rule laid down by the Buddha has been unbreakable for 5,000 years of the Buddha’s dispensation” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 91). That is to say, given the contextual nature of the Vinayaṭaka, where the interpretation of “case law” has to attend to the actual causes and conditions for the Buddha’s proclamations, this secondary regulation is only applicable under the right circumstances, namely, in the absence of a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. In this sense, the “original allowance could be considered a legal precedent” (Bodhi 2010, 120), one which has never been overturned. The logic then is inescapable for the Mingun Jetavana: since the Buddha did not revoke this supplementary rule, and since we currently find ourselves in the situation where there is no *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, the supplementary regulation is once again in effect, just as it was for the 500 Sākyan women. As such, the Mingun Jetavana boldly declares the validity of his own interpretation, embedding it in a stock phrase from the Tipiṭaka: “Thus this is indeed permitted by the Blessed One, the One who knows, the One who sees, the Worthy One, by the Completely Fully Awakened One, [that] a woman should at present be thus ordained by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*.”³⁹⁵

statement now, since there is not an extant Theravāda lineage of *bhikkhunī*, at least not until the efforts that began in the 1990s (Anālayo 2017, 22).

³⁹⁵ *iti ayameva tena bhagavatā jānatā passatā arahatā sammāsambuddhena anujānito mātugāmo bhikkhusaṅghena etarahi evaṃ upasampādetabbo* (Mil-a 197,²⁶⁻²⁸)

8.3 *Buddhamataññū*: One Who Knows the Intention of the Buddha

By couching his own admittedly idiosyncratic interpretation in this stock phrase, which in many other declarations of the Buddha’s knowledge found in the Tipiṭaka,³⁹⁶ the Mingun Jetavana is essentially claiming that this is the view the Buddha held all along, but which future monks—his contemporaries—were unable to appreciate. Yet the Mingun Jetavana’s unique interpretation as a commentator is not just that the Buddha set up the dynamic between root and secondary regulations to instill an element of *ad-hoc* flexibility in how monastic discipline was executed, but that he foresaw the very historical moment in which we now find ourselves, namely, the non-existence of a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. My argument is that his resolution of the two apparently contradictory positions around the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* is only possible because the Mingun Jetavana, with the *abhiññās* as his epistemological foundation, has collapsed the distinction between the age of the Buddha and his own time. He is able to do so because of the underlying concept of the Buddha’s omniscience at play in the Vinayapiṭaka, which “expresses the Buddha’s omniscience by demonstrating the Buddha’s knowledge of time” (Heim 2018b, 184). If we accept this play of omniscience, alluded to by the two participles *jānatā passata* (“the One who sees, the One who knows”) in the stock phrase above, the texts that make up the Vinayapiṭaka “must be judged not as literal, frozen truths, but as enactments in time” (Gold 2015, 118), enactments which unfold according to changing historical circumstances in the life course of the *sāsana*. In more practical terms, Ben Schonthal likens the Vinayapiṭaka to a “living constitution” that has a certain amount of built-in plasticity to respond to the “changing needs of

³⁹⁶ See, e.g., D I 2,¹¹; D II 213,¹¹⁻¹²; M I 350,⁵; A I 67,^{34-68,1}; A II 196,¹¹⁻¹²; Vin V 1,²⁻³, as a small sample of such statements, most of which seem to be found in the first four books of the Suttapiṭaka and the *Parivāra* of the Vinayapiṭaka.

monks” (Schonthal 2018, 14). What is vital for our discussion here is that this plasticity in how and when the different types of regulations are applied is no accident, at least according to the commentarial tradition inherited by the Mingun Jetavana. While early layers of the Tipiṭaka were ambiguous about the omniscient status of the Buddha, by the commentarial period, we find “expressions like ‘*atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ sabbaṃ jānāti*’” used to refer to the Buddha, claiming that he is one who “knows everything concerning the past, future and present” (Endo 2016, 57). The Mingun Jetavana agrees, reaffirming in the middle of his argument for the reintroduction of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* that “all bodily[, vocal and mental] action of the Blessed One [i.e. the Buddha] was preceded by wisdom and accompanied by wisdom. In the past, perfect knowledge was unobstructed. In the future it will be unobstructed. In the present it is unobstructed.”³⁹⁷ In this statement we see that for the Mingun Jetavana, the Buddha’s wisdom is manifest not just in the past—in the Vinayaṭiṭaka as an historical set of rules—but in the Buddha’s future, our present. Such is the critical role that knowledge of the future plays in the Mil-a, not because the Mingun Jetavana possesses this higher form of knowledge himself but because he is commenting on the words of the Buddha, for whom the obstructions of past, present, and future did and do not exist.

Working with the Buddha’s omniscience in the background, the Mingun Jetavana is thus able to admit that the statement, “I allow, o *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs* to be ordained by *bhikkhus*,” is

³⁹⁷ *bhagavato sabbaṃ kāyakammaṃ nāṇapubbaṅgamaṃ nāṇānuparivatti/ atīte aṃse apaṭihatañānadassanaṃ/ anāgate aṃse apaṭihatañānadassanaṃ/ paccuppanne aṃse apaṭihatañānadassanaṃ* (Mil-a 196,²⁰⁻²²). This is in fact a slightly condensed quotation from the Nett (17,²⁵⁻³¹), a text which Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli argues is not a commentary *per se*, but a sort of guide for would-be commentators (Ñāṇamoli [1962b] 1977, xliv), like the Mingun Jetavana.

“an utterance of the Blessed One spoken in the past, a determination because of the non-existence regarding the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha* [at that time,]” while at the same time claiming it is

also [a statement] for the future, which is a resolution because of the non-existence of the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha*. It is also a resolution [by the Buddha relevant] to the present because of the non-existence of the *bhikkhuni saṅgha* [in our own time]; having seen with unobstructed perfect knowledge and omniscient wisdom, [the ordination of *bhikkhunīs* by *bhikkhus*] is to be allowed.³⁹⁸

The supplementary rule in question, according to the Mingun Jetavana, was therefore never abrogated or limited because it was meant precisely to apply to the current situation. Thus, for the Mingun Jetavana, the Buddha, using his knowledge of the future (our present), “saw” that “in the future too, the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha* will be non-existent.”³⁹⁹ His allowance that *bhikkhus* could ordain *bhikkhunīs* was not just an expediency for the 500 Sākyan women, as claimed by conservative Theravada legalists, but a means for someone like the Mingun Jetavana to reinstate the *bhikkhuni-saṅgha* 2500 years after his passing. Hence one “should not ignore,” in the warning of the Mingun Jetavana, “the sphere of authority of the wisdom of omniscience,”⁴⁰⁰ one “should not destroy the hope of all persons.”⁴⁰¹

What is most remarkable and perhaps the most contentious about the epistemology of commentary here is that by invoking the concept of the doctrine handed down to future monks, the Mingun Jetavana understands the Buddha to be directly addressing him. For he asserts that in this matter, “the *saṅgha* must be informed by a monk who knows the intention of the Blessed

³⁹⁸ *bhagavato vacanaṃ atītaṃse pi bhikkhunīsāṅghe abhāvaparicchedaṃ/ anāgataṃse pi bhikkhunīsāṅghassa abhāvaparicchedaṃ/ paccuppannaṃse pi bhikkhunīsāṅghassa abhāvaparicchedaṃ apaṭihataññānadassanena sabbaññūñāṇena passitvā va anujānitabbaṃ* (Mil-a 196,²⁴⁻²⁸)

³⁹⁹ *anāgate pi ti bhikkhunīsāṅgho abhāvo bhavissatī ti passatā* (Mil-a 197,²⁰⁻²¹)

⁴⁰⁰ *sabbaññūñāṇassa āñācakkamaṃ na pahārayitabbaṃ* (Mil-a 197,⁸)

⁴⁰¹ *sabbapuggalānaṃ āsā na chinditabbā* (Mil-a 197,⁹)

One, who is experienced and competent.”⁴⁰² In this way, the Mingun Jetavana is locating himself securely within the sphere of authority of the Buddha’s wisdom of omniscience. As a result, he boldly claims, at the end of his argument for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, that “we will know the wish of the Blessed One. We will see the face of the Blessed one like (*saṅkāsa*) the full moon. With the desire to perform the *bhikkhunī* teaching foremost [in his mind], a monk should cultivate [the teaching] with virtue, in the celebrated place of the Blessed One.”⁴⁰³ This affirmation is rather extraordinary within the context of the neoconservative Theravada hierarchy in Burma, because the Mingun Jetavana is not just interpreting the text, but trying to speak on behalf of Buddha, almost putting words into his mouth. Put another way, the Mingun Jetavana is making a demand on the intention of the Buddha as expressed in the Vinayaṭīka, which has major ramifications in a tradition that sees itself as the curator of the Buddha’s original and unadulterated teachings. In fact, the Mingun Jetavana is referred to by his present-day disciples as the *buddhamataññū*, or “one who knows the intention of the Buddha.” Such a pretension may have been even more controversial than the argument for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, for as he says above, the Mingun Jetavana is effectively acting “in the celebrated place of the Blessed One (*bhagavato thomite thāne*).” As Bodhi explains, “[f]or monks to attempt to reconstitute a broken bhikkhunī saṅgha, it is said, is to claim a privilege unique to a perfectly enlightened Buddha, and no one but the next Buddha can claim that” (Bodhi 2010, 104–5). Yet such a declaration is exactly what is being made by the Mingun Jetavana in invoking the

⁴⁰² *bhagavato adhippāyaṃ jānantena byattena bhikkhunā paṭibalena saṅgho ñāpetabbo* (Mil-a 197,²⁹⁻³¹)

⁴⁰³ *bhagavato manorathaṃ jānissāma/ bhagavato puṇṇindusaṅkāsamukhaṃ passissāma ti/ taṃ pi bhikkhunīsāsaṇaṃ kātukāmena pubbaṅgamaṇa bhikkhunā nāma bhagavato thomite thāne kusalena bhavitabbaṃ ti* (Mil-a 203,¹⁰⁻¹³)

intention of the Buddha to make his argument, representing the pinnacle and perhaps the boldest conceit of the commentarial vocation.

Ultimately, the Mingun Jetavana's argument for the reestablishment of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* amounts to a sort of "reverse prolepsis" made possible by the epistemology of the *abhiññās* not just as powers that collapse time, but as the substratum over which the history of the *sāsana* unfolds. By including knowledge of the future in his list of the higher forms of knowledge, the Mingun Jetavana is setting up what Jonardon Ganeri refers to as the "proleptic" function of commentary, where "an agent might be engaged in an activity of self-consciously addressing a future audience whose socio-political and intellectual context is unknown" (Ganeri 2011, 68). Opportunities for proleptic interpretations by commentators are abundant "when the intellectual 'context' is a Sanskrit [or Pali] knowledge system, an entity conceived of by its participants as possessing enormous longevity" (Ganeri 2011, 68). In trying to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, the Mingun Jetavana is leveraging the proleptic potential of the Pali literary world, except in this case, he is applying prolepsis in reverse, since the agent is the historical Buddha, and the Mingun Jetavana has to work backwards from the present to know this agent's intention. Yet crucially for this commentator, the enlightened agent in question actually does know the "socio-political and intellectual content" of the future, at least within the hermeneutical circle, thereby animating the concept of "methods handed down for future monks" (*P. anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ nayo dinno*) which underlies the whole Mil-a. But to appreciate the full framework within which the Mingun Jetavana makes his argument, we must attend to the soteriological ramifications of the mass-lay meditation movement, for what is at stake is not just the ordination of women, as important as that issue is, but the vitality of the *sāsana* itself. This concern, I argue, is also what we see in the advocacy of Adiccavamsa, a junior contemporary of the Mingun

Jetavana who argued for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in part based on his own readings of the Mil.

8.4 Adiccavamsa

A gifted scholar and progressive thinker with diverse interests not limited to Buddhism, Adiccavamsa was also known as a reformer of the strict neo-conservative of his native Burma. Going against the monastic consensus at the time about the centrality of Pali and Burmese in religious education, Adiccavamsa was an Anglophone who spent over ten years in England starting in the late 1920s (Janaka Ashin 2016, 108). In addition to English, he “pursued further studies in [...] Hind[i], Sanskrit, Urdu, Bengali, and Japanese script in India, Sri Lanka and England. He had [a] desire to write Buddhist literatures into these languages” (Tejinda 2017, 42). According to Janaka Ashin, “Ādiccavaṃsa twice refused to accept the coveted *Aggamahāpaṇḍita* title [as a foremost Pali scholar in Burma] because he did not want to be complicit with the colonial authorities” and even went so far as to declare that “he was not sure that Buddhism was the highest truth, and that if he found a higher truth he would accept it in preference to Buddhism” (Janaka 2016, 109; see also Kawanami 2007, 231).⁴⁰⁴ As these statements indicate, Adiccavamsa was not against reforming Theravada Buddhism in his native Burma, becoming “an advocate for vegetarianism for both monks and the laity (Janaka Ashin 2016, 112). He also “allow[ed] laypersons to wear shoes in his monastery in Yangon” (Janaka

⁴⁰⁴ Hiroko Kawanami’s translation of this passage, taken from page 26 of the *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa*, runs “I have studied many other religious traditions and examined their religious teachings. So far I think Buddhism is the best and the most valid teaching of all. However, if I ever come across a better religion (than Buddhism) that conveys the ultimate truth, I am open minded enough to become a follower” (2007, 231). Eventually Ādiccavaṃsa did disrobe in 1941 and married a lay woman (Tejinda 2017, 96), though his reasons for disrobing are unclear to me at present.

Ashin 2016, 133), demonstrating his relatively liberal attitude to Buddhism. And as we saw in Chapter Two and Chapter Seven, Adiccavamsa was keenly interested in the Mil. Not so much for the *abhiññās*, as in the case of the Mingun Jetavana, but because of the “Greek *abhidhamma*” contained therein and the way the text assimilated new and innovative ideas from abroad into the Buddhist fold. Hence for Adiccavamsa, the Mil was a potential vehicle for reform and a means to adapt Buddhism to the new epistemologies and technologies entering colonial Burma.

This liberal attitude towards interpreting Pali texts demonstrated by Adiccavamsa’s interest in the Mil was also evident in his approach to reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. In 1935, he published a monograph in Burmese of over 297 pages titled the *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa* (ဘိက္ခုနီ-သာသန-ဥပဒေသ *Instruction on the Sāsana of Nuns*) (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935). As the title indicates, Adiccavamsa advocates for reinstating full ordination for women in Burma, deploying some of the same arguments that the Mingun Jetavana would use in his Mil-a that the latter started three or four years after the *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa*. Although in his 2017 thesis Ashin Tejinda suggests that the Mingun Jetavana followed the lead of Adiccavamsa, the timeline and provenance of these arguments are not so clear, and it is probably more accurate to see such ideas as generally percolating amongst subsections of the monastic and lay community before their proclamations in print. For instance, in his *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa*, Adiccavamsa references the Mingun Jetavana when giving his initial rebuttal to opponents of his ideas, citing the latter as an authority in the Tipiṭaka and implying that the Mingun Jetavana either shared or was sympathetic to his views around the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, 22). Another link between these two is the fact that the *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa* was first written at the behest of the Mingun Jetavana’s prominent lay student and the meditation teacher, U Myat Kyaw (ဦးမြတ်ကျော် Ṫḥ Mrat kyau a.k.a., ဦးပဏ္ဍိဓမ္မ Ṫḥ Paṇḍidhamma, 1884-1947; hereafter Myat

Kyaw (Prumḥ khyau 2009, 332; 334)). Maung Maung refers to Myat Kyaw as “[o]ne of the most influential and dedicated founders of meditation centres intended specifically to take in lay aspirants for the serious pursuit of the Buddha’s *dhamma*” (1980, 113), claiming that in “the early 1930s, his was the most widely known and accepted of the meditation centres exclusively organized and run for the lay public” (Maung Maung 1980, 114).⁴⁰⁵ In the *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa*, Adiccavaṃsa explains that his monograph partly arose from a casual conversation between Myat Kyaw, Ādiccavaṃsa, and others⁴⁰⁶ on the possibility of re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, and without explicit permission, Myat Kyaw reported on the conversation and had it published in a newspaper under a pseudonym (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, 5–6). The resulting controversy in the public sphere compelled Adiccavaṃsa to write on this subject, especially after Myat Kyaw beseeched him to intervene in the ensuing debate (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, 7–9). The *Ādiccavaṃsa atthupatti* adds that Myat Kyaw “made copies of the finished manuscript with a typewriter and sent them to the leading scholarly (*piṭaka*) sayadaws throughout the Myanmar nation to receive [their] opinions”⁴⁰⁷ (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 16). Given the intimacy between the Mingun Jetavana and Myat Kyaw, and between Myat Kyaw and Adiccavaṃsa, it is likely that the Mingun Jetavana and Adiccavaṃsa were aware of each other’s ideas around reviving the

⁴⁰⁵ Myat Kyaw is also mentioned as a leading figure in spreading the Mingun Jetavana’s method of meditation to Shan Buddhist communities in the 1930s, with 33 meditation centres in this lineage still active today (Jotika Khur-Yearn 2019, 333). In an endnote, Jotika Khur-Yearn attributes nine texts to Myat Kyaw, most of which are dedicated to the practice of *vipassanā* (2019, 342).

⁴⁰⁶ Those mentioned as taking part in this conversation include the Pinḥ kan Sayadaw, Ashin Nandamedhā (ပိန်းကန် ဆရာတော် အရှင်နန္ဒမေဓာ), the Bāh ka rā tau ra Sayadaw, Ashin Jāniya (ဗားကရာတောရ ဆရာတော် အရှင်ဇာနိယ) and other unnamed monks (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, 5).

⁴⁰⁷ ရေးပြီးသော စာမူများကို [...] လက်နှိပ်စက်နှင့် မိတ္တူကူးပေး၍ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ အရပ်ရှိ ပိဋကအကျော် ဆရာတော်များထံသို့ ပို့ကာထင်မြင်ချက် ရယူခဲ့သည် (Mrañ. chve (မြင့်ဆွေ) [1965] 2017, 16)

bhikkhunī-saṅgha and may have even developed their arguments in collaboration. What makes them both unique, however, is their willingness to attach their names to such views and assert their arguments in print and for posterity.

As a result of publishing his *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa*, Adiccavamsa was roundly criticized by other monastics and lay people in Burmese newspapers in 1934 and 1935, with an action taken against him called a *pakāsanīya-kamma*,⁴⁰⁸ what Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu translates as an “information-transaction” where the lay community is informed that the charged individual is a “changed man whose actions no longer reflected the will of the [monastic] Community” (Ṭhānissaro 2013, II:1289). At its core, the *pakāsanīya-kamma* is “a public accusation of wrongdoing” (Janaka Ashin and Crosby 2017, 220), meant to advance an open and civil censure of an individual monastic without actually taking formal action against the individual within the confines of the Vinayapiṭaka.⁴⁰⁹ While Adiccavamsa was not forced to disrobe (as he did not commit an identifiable *pārājika* offence) Hiroko Kawanami describes the monastic hierarchy as “subjecting [him] to a prolonged period of isolation” because of his publication, during which he “was excluded from all *Saṅgha* activities” (Kawanami 2007, 232). The *Ādiccavaṃsa atthuppatti*

⁴⁰⁸ As Janaka Ashin points out, Ādiccavaṃsa’s close friend Ukkattha, introduced in the first chapter as the president of the editing process for the Sixth Council, was also subject to such an action for writing his book, *Born Human, Die Human* (လူ့သဘာဝကြွေ လူ့စေ့လူ့စွဲ *lū se lū phrac*) (Janaka Ashin 2016, 12). What was unique about this case was that it did not involve the accusation of misinterpreting the Vinayapiṭaka, such as in the case against Ādiccavaṃsa, but in promulgating a mistaken reading of *dhamma*, namely, Ukkattha’s belief that once born as a human, an individual cannot regress to the lower realms (of animal etc.), no matter how much bad karma they accrue. While he was convicted under the U Nu administration, Ukkattha received a pardon as part of a general amnesty under Ne Win’s Revolutionary Council in 1963 (Janaka Ashin and Crosby 2017, 203).

⁴⁰⁹ As Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu explains, the *pakāsanīyā kamma*, which is first attested to when the Buddha censures his cousin, Devadatta, for trying to aggressively take over the leadership of the *saṅgha*, “contains none of the other necessary explanations that would allow for the transaction to become a generalized pattern. In other words, there is no list of the qualities with which the object should be endowed, no description of how he should behave, and no allowance for revoking the transaction. Thus it seems to have been intended as a one-time event and cannot be included in a Community’s repertoire of disciplinary measures” (Ṭhānissaro 2013, II:1289).

points out that one of the lay people leading the charge against Adiccavamsa in the proceedings was U Saw, the would-be prime minister of Burma from 1940-1942 and the person executed for the assassination of General Aung San in 1947 ([1965] 2017, 22), indicating that the whole affair was highly politicized and of national import. After the public condemnation of Adiccavamsa in the *pakāsanīya kamma*, he composed a second book detailing the events, *Bhikkhunī areḥ puṃ kyam* (ဘိက္ခုနီအရေးပုံကျမ်း: *Story of the Bhikkhunī Affair*). In this text, which is 434 pages long, Adiccavamsa lists the arguments for and against his earlier monograph, cites the main people involved in his *pakāsanīya* censure, and further explains his reasons for wading into the controversy.⁴¹⁰ While the *Bhikkhunī areḥ puṃ kyam* is an important text in need of further study, I will limit my discussion here to the *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa*, comparing Adiccavamsa's argument for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* with that of the Mingun Jetavana.

8.5 Argument of the *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa*

The first question that confronts us is what was so controversial in this text that made public figures like U Saw bring a *pakāsanīya-kamma* against its author? The obvious answer is that Adiccavamsa was arguing against received orthodoxy in reinstating the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, and like the Mingun Jetavana, using the Tipiṭaka to do so. In fact, Adiccavamsa's argument is strikingly similar to that of the latter, as both advocated for the single ordination method where

⁴¹⁰ Adiccavamsa's friend Shin Ukkaṭṭha (1897-1978), who would later be tried for his heterodox views on reincarnation, was also subjected to a *pakāsanīya-kamma*, to which he too wrote a "robust response" called the *Tanpyan Pakāsanīya* (Janaka Ashin and Crosby 2017, 220). The reason why the *pakāsanīya-kamma* was resorted to was because after the military coup of 1962, the Ne Win regime was not interested in supporting the monastic court system set up by U Nu, meaning that without the means of state enforcement, the monastic hierarchy was forced to resort to this public censure (Janaka Ashin and Crosby 2017, 220), which ultimately had no real teeth behind it other than ruining the reputation of the individual so charged.

bhikkhus ordain *bhikkhunīs*. According to Adiccavamsa, the situation is quite simple, for the “*Bhikkhunī Saṃgha* can be revived as long as *Bhikkhu Saṃgha* who can give ordination in accordance with the first rule exists” (Bu trans. Tejinda 2017, 47).⁴¹¹ The reason for this possibility is because, like the Mingun Jetavana, Adiccavamsa takes the Buddha’s declaration that *bhikkhunīs* can be ordained by *bhikkhus* as being still valid (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, 72–73). Part of Adiccavamsa’s argument rests on the fact that when the Buddha meant for one set of rules to override earlier pronouncements, he explicitly abolished the initial rule. For example:

With regard to the *Bhikkhu* ordination, the Buddha originally prescribed “*Bhikkhus*, I allow giving of higher ordination by taking three refuges.” Later the Buddha said, “From this day on, *Bhikkhus*, I abolish ordination by taking the three refuges that I had prescribed *Bhikkhus*, I allow ordination by *Ñatticatutthakammavācā* (*kammavaca* of *four ñatti*).” Just as the Buddha officially abolished *Bhikkhu* ordination by taking the three refuges, here also [in the case of the one-sided ordination of *bhikkhunīs* by *bhikkhus*], he should have officially withdrawn the first rule if he had a desire to abolish it. This case is very significant. He did not withdraw the first rule. Therefore, it is still valid.⁴¹² (Bu trans. Tejinda 2017, 44–45)

What we see in this excerpt from the *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa* is Adiccavamsa making his own claim on the intention of the Buddha, but without recourse to the Buddha’s knowledge of the future or other *abhiññās*. Instead, he is arguing for the consistency of the Buddha in laying down the rules for ordination as found in the Vinayaṭīka, using an analogous case to imply that we should not treat the ordination of women as some separate category different in kind from the ordination of men. In this instance, he is being a strict literalist and a rationalist, contending that the absence of a clear abrogation of the regulation that *bhikkhus* can ordain *bhikkhunīs* is a positive sign that the Buddha never meant for this rule to lapse, even with the introduction of the

⁴¹¹ Ashin Tejinda does not translate the full text in his thesis, but offers selected paragraphs meant to highlight the main thrust of Ādiccavaṃsa’s argument. According to Ashin Tejinda, this excerpt comes from page 77 in the original 1935 text.

⁴¹² Page 72 in the *Bhikkhu-sāsana-upadesa*.

sixth *garudhamma* stipulating that after a period of training, women should be ordained by *bhikkhunīs* first. The implication here is that if the Buddha wanted to abolish the singled-sided ordination, he would have explicitly done so.

Yet while the Mingun Jetavana makes a subtle distinction between this sixth *garudhamma*, which he sees as a root regulation, and the declaration by the Buddha that *bhikkhunīs* can be ordained by *bhikkhus*, which he takes as a supplementary regulation meant to apply in the absence of a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, Adiccavamsa has a more liberal reading, or rereading, of the *garudhammas* as a whole. He claims instead that they are not binding, “since these were, in his view, only *ovāda*, ‘instructions’, or even a kind of a provisional code that was drawn up before any problem had actually come about” (Kawanami 2007, 236). To this end, Adiccavamsa bluntly states that the “Eight *Garudhammas* are not rules. In *Aṭṭhakatha*, they have been used as a metaphor like rules. Indeed, they are an agreement of women to become *Bhikkhuni*. If the *Garudhammas* are accepted as an agreement, it was intended to be used only for Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī to become a *Bhikkhuni*”⁴¹³ (Bu trans. Tejinda 2017, 48). Bhikkhuni Kusuma echoes this same sentiment some 65 years later, when she argues that “it was only Mahāpajāpatī who accepted the *garudhammas* as the condition for her ordination, and not the other [500] Sakyan women” (Kusuma 2000, 6). The *garudhammas* are problematic for Bhikkhuni Kusuma because they were not instituted following the regular procedure of introducing new rules in the Vinayaṭṭhaka and many later rules that were “properly” established in the *bhikkhunī* monastic code resemble the *garudhammas*, making their redundancy

⁴¹³ Ashin Tejinda paraphrases this excerpt from pages 82-84.

conspicuous (Kusuma 2000, 9).⁴¹⁴ As the quote above indicates, Adiccavaṃsa also takes the *garudhammas* to be problematic and is interpreting them figuratively, as “metaphors” meant to guide the practice of *bhikkhunīs* but which are not binding. Since they are not binding, he believes the inability to follow their letter should not disbar a woman from receiving the *bhikkhunī-upasampadā*.⁴¹⁵

The reason why Adiccavaṃsa must dispute the authority of the *garudhammas* to advance his argument is because the sixth *garudhamma* stipulates that a female novice, after completing her training in the six *dhammas* for two years, must be ordained by both orders. As Bhikkhu Bodhi explains, for a woman to enter into the stage of a probationer (*P. sikkhamānā*), there must be a “legal act of the saṅgha” (*P. saṅgha-kamma*) overseen by other *bhikkhunīs* (Bodhi 2010, 102). Then, to sanction the completion of this training regime, the probationer “must obtain an ‘agreement’ (*sammati*) from the saṅgha” (Bodhi 2010, 103), a task which also falls to *bhikkhunīs*. If the *garudhammas*, specifically the sixth, are interpreted just as figurative instructions, then the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* can also seamlessly function in these same roles,

⁴¹⁴ Probing the somewhat awkward fit between the *garudhammas* and the *bhikkhunīpāṭimokkha*, Ute Hüsken suggests that it is possible that the importance of the eight rules were amplified by monks during the editing process of the Pali canon (2010, 144). She goes on to state that we cannot be certain that “the Buddha himself formulated the eight *garudhammas* as preconditions for female ordination” (2010, 147–48), a view shared by many other scholars. Yet Bhikkhu Anālayo disagrees with this scholarly consensus, arguing that the observations put forth by Bhikkhunī Kusuma and Hüsken do not in themselves prove that all of the *garudhammas* are later developments (2016b, 99; 2017, 11–12).

⁴¹⁵ In this, Ādiccavaṃsa is taking a different approach from some contemporary scholars, who argue that the *garudhammas* are later interpolations to the Vinaya-piṭaka. Hüsken, for example, writes that “it is possible that the compilation of the *garudhammas* to hand constitutes a later insertion into the Vinaya, which is more recent than the rules corresponding to the *garudhammas* in the Pācittiya section of the *Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga* (Hüsken 2000, 65). For evidence, she points to the “unsystematic order of the eight *garudhammas* in the *Cullavagga*; the difference in the sequence of *garudhammas* in the traditions of other Buddhist schools, as well as the parallels both literal and in content in the Pācittiya section of the *Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga*,” all of which lead Hüsken to suggest that these *garudhammas* are the “produce of a process of development” emphasized by more conservative elements of the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* (Hüsken 2000, 65). Despite his own text-critical approach, Ādiccavaṃsa does not question the existence of the *garudhammas* in the earliest layers of Pāli texts, but instead downplays their elevation to the status of binding rules.

conducting the “legal act of the *saṅgha*” and giving its confirmation as to the successful completion of the training period. As Ashin Tejinda summarized Adiccavamsa’s position on this point, “the significant requirement is a mere observance of six rules for two years” (Tejinda 2017, 59), not who ultimately officiates the process. What is especially crucial for Adiccavamsa to confront, however, is the last part of the sixth *garudhamma*, the stipulation that female candidates must be ordained by both sides of the *saṅgha*. In this process, the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* performs the ceremony first after the candidate has been “questioned about various obstructions to ordination, among them issues relating to a women’s sexual identity” (Bodhi 2010, 122). Only after the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* has ordained the candidate, the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* then performs essentially the same procedure, without carrying out this potentially sensitive line of questioning. Yet despite the temporal precedence afforded the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in this procedure, the entire process must still be sanctioned by the *bhikkhu-saṅgha*, meaning that “[i]n this arrangement, it is still the *bhikkhu saṅgha* that functions as the ultimate authority determining the validity of the ordination” (Bodhi 2010, 122). Simply put, it is the *bhikkhu-saṅgha* that oversees the ordination of women in the end, even in the presence of a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. Adiccavamsa argues the same point, writing that

[a]ccording to the *Pāli* word, "*ekato upasampann[ā]ya*" [(by being ordained by one side)] *Bhikkhunī ordination* has not yet completed and it is just for the sake of clearance in the presence of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*. The interrogation in the presence of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* was permitted merely to relieve the shyness and fear of female candidates. Hence, permission only for interrogation is obvious. Consequently, it should not be in vain to benefits of all women folks and Buddha *Sāsanā* due to the lack of the *Bhikkhunīs* who have duty merely for an interrogation.⁴¹⁶ (Bu trans. Tejinda 2017, 46)

⁴¹⁶ Here Ashin Tejinda indicates that he is taking this excerpt from pages 74-75 in the *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa*.

In this line of thought, Adiccavamsa is interpreting the sixth *garudhamma*'s requirement of a two-sided ordination as more a guideline or best-case scenario, meant to spare potentially reluctant female candidates the embarrassment of revealing personal details to *bhikkhus*. Again, he is claiming that this regulation should not be seen as binding or used as an obstacle to block the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. Indeed, as Bhikkhu Bodhi makes clear from his own reading of the “variant cases section attached to the [relevant] bhikkhunī” monastic rules (*pācittiya*s 63 and 64), “the Vinaya did not regard as invalid an upasampadā ordination that failed to fully conform to the procedures laid down in the eight *garudhamma*” (Bodhi 2010, 128), adding further evidence to Adiccavamsa’s figurative reading of the *garudhammas* as helpful but not compulsory instructions. Like his reading of the Mil and the “Greek *abhidhamma*” seen above, Adiccavamsa is offering a more liberal interpretation of the words of the Buddha.

It is not surprising, then, that when responding to the efforts to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* by Saccavādī in Sri Lanka, the state monastic hierarchy (Saṅgha Mahā Nāyaka) of Burma composed a judgement that, according to Kawanami, “focuses on the nature of the *garudhamma* rules” (Kawanami 2007, 234). This judgement, titled *Bhikkhunī vinicchaya cā tamḥ* (ဘိက္ခုနီဝိနိစ္ဆယစာတမ်း: *Record of the Bhikkhunī Decision*) (hereafter the *Bhikkhunī-vinicchaya*),⁴¹⁷ in essence builds its case on the sixth *garudhamma* rule necessitating that a

⁴¹⁷ Ashin Saraṇa, who has translated part of this document in his New Pilgrim newsletter (161004), gives the full title of this text as “ယခုကာလဝယ် ထေရဝါဒဗုဒ္ဓသာသနာတော်၌ ဘိက္ခုနီ ရှိသင့်-မရှိသင့် ပြဆိုရာဖြစ်သော ဘိက္ခုနီဝိနိစ္ဆယစာတမ်း,” or “The Document on Resolution of Bhikkhunī(s) Which Explains Whether Bhikkhunī(s) Should Be or Should Not Be [Included] in the Buddha's Dispensation of Theravāda in Present Era.” (n.d., 9). This first text, published in 2004, should be distinguished from a second text, the *Bhikkhunī-bhāvābhāva-vinicchaya* (*The Judgement on the Existence or Non-Existence of Nuns*), published in 2006 as a formal accounting of the case brought against Saccavādī in the Burmese monastic court system.

female candidate for *upasampadā* receive her ordination from a dual *saṅgha*. While Adiccavamsa takes this rule (and the other seven *garudhamma*) to be unnecessary, and while the Mingun Jetavana understands the *garudhammas* as root regulations that can be modified in conjunction with supplementary regulations, the “Burmese *Saṅgha* holds that th[e sixth *garudhamma*] is a major ruling, which is binding, and therefore the ‘dual’ ordination stipulated in it has to be adhered to at all costs” (Kawanami 2007, 235). Although the *Bhikkhunī-vinicchaya* was written in 2004, almost seventy years after the *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa* of Adiccavamsa, it represents the orthodox perspective of the monastic hierarchy in Burma, one that probably reflects the views of the same hierarchy in the first half of the twentieth century. By undermining the status of the *garudhammas*, Adiccavamsa was not just (seen to be) reinterpreting the words of the Buddha but undermining the official interpretation of the Burmese monastic community, or rather, the right of the *saṅgha* hierarchy to make such final pronouncements. Hence while the arguments for the revival of the *bhikkhunī sāsana* are what ostensibly “attracted the attention of the general public, [...] they were alerted to the fact that seemingly [Adiccavamsa] was trying to challenge the authority of the *Saṅgha*” (Kawanami 2007, 231). To do so, or at least to be perceived as doing so, is much more provocative than advocating for the reinstatement of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, for it potentially subverts the monastic hierarchy’s monopoly on interpreting the exclusive canon and their view of *sāsana* history as a whole.

8.6 Beyond the 5000-year limit of the *Sāsana*

The controversy around reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* must thus be understood as one aspect of the millennia-old debate around the longevity of the *sāsana*, which has always been socially and politically charged at the highest levels of government and civil society in what we now call

Burma. This connection is clear given the canonical account of the Buddha’s early reluctance to admit women into the monastic community, where it is said he feared doing so would shorten the timespan of his teachings by one half. The *garudhammas*, also at the centre of debates around reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, were instituted, according to Buddhaghosa’s commentarial explanation, to prevent just such a decline after allowing women to ordain as *bhikkhunīs*. Hence when giving its opinion against reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, the *Bhikkhunī-vinicchaya* quotes the preeminent Burmese scholar monk, the Mingun Sayadaw (Maṅḥ kvanḥ Cha rā tau, a.k.a. Ūḥ Vicittasarabhivamsa; 1911-1993), who signals the highest of stakes in this debate: “In the world, [the] danger [to] the Buddha *Sasana* actually appears because some monks are trying to revive [the] *Bhikkhunī sāsana*”⁴¹⁸ (Bhv trans. Tejinda 2017, 81). It is no surprise, then, that almost the final third of the *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa*, from pages 219 to the conclusion on 297, is devoted to discussing the various timelines for the disappearance of the *sāsana*, as mentioned in Chapter Six. These timelines include what is found in the Tipiṭaka, the *aṭṭhakathās*, the views of Burmese monks like the Ledi, the position of Adiccavamsa’s contemporaries, and the views of Adiccavamsa himself. The position of Adiccavamsa, it appears, was considered unorthodox and catalyzed in part the initial hostility to the *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa*. For example, when discussing the newspaper headlines of those protesting Adiccavamsa’s publication, the author of the *Ādiccavaṃsa atthuppatti* states that alongside the effort to reinstate the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, Adiccavamsa’s contention that “‘the life of the Buddha’s *sāsana* also is more than 5000 [years, that] it may be longer because one wants for it to be longer than 6000 [years]’ has surely been disturbing to dogmatic people who have already formed the opinion that says, ‘the *bhikkhūnī*

⁴¹⁸ Ashin Tejinda takes this quote from page 42 of the *Bhikkhun-vinicchaya*.

sāsana is not able to exist at all. The age of the [Buddha’s] *sāsana* is also 5000 [years] only”⁴¹⁹ (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 16–17). The 5000-year timeline of the Buddha’s *sāsana* is not found fully formed in canonical texts but “appear[s] for the first time in the commentarial literature of the Pāli tradition” (Endo 2013, 136). Despite the many discrepancies in the account of this process of degeneration among the various commentaries (Endo 2013, 135), the 5000-year duration of the *sāsana* is taken as the orthodox model in Burma, with any aberrations on this view meeting with strict monastic sanction or even harsh state repression.

In yet another connection between the Mingun Jetavana and Adiccavamsa, the latter partly develops his position on the longevity of the *sāsana* based on the Mil, the same text that the Mingun Jetavana comments on and uses to propound his own theory for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. Coming in between the Tipiṭaka and the *aṭṭhakathās*, Toshiichi Endo clarifies that the Mil “shows a new classification of the disappearance of the True Dhamma, a step further than its canonical interpretation, and this classification can be regarded as a link connecting the Canon to the commentaries” (Endo 2013, 127). Indeed, the Mil is considered paracanonical in all Theravada countries except Burma, where it was officially endorsed as part of the exclusive canon during the 1871 Fifth Council (see Chapter One). The canonical status of the Mil is thus important for Adiccavamsa’s textual argument because it affords the views found in the Mil precedence over the commentarial accounts of the longevity of the *sāsana*. To make his case that the *sāsana* will last more than 5000 years, Adiccavamsa examines the same two-pronged,

⁴¹⁹ ဗုဒ္ဓသာသနာသက်လည်း ငါးထောင်မက၊ ခြောက် ထောင်လည်းမက ရှည်ချင်သလောက် ရှည်လိမ့်မည်” ဟူသော ကြော်ငြာ၏ ခေါင်းစဉ်ကပင်လျှင် “ဘိက္ခုနီသာသနာ လုံးဝမရှိနိုင်ပြီ။ သာသနာသက် လည်း ၅၀၀၀ သာရှိသည်” ဟု တထစ်ချ ယူဆထားကြသော တရားသေသမားများအဖို့ ကျောချမ်းစရာ ဖြစ်နေသည် (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 16–17)

dilemmatic question the Mingun Jetavana uses to introduce his arguments for re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, namely, the apparent contradiction between the Buddha’s prediction that the *sāsana* will last only 500 years on account of admitting women into the *saṅgha*, and the prediction to Subhadda the recluse that “if in this system the monks live the perfect life, then the world will not be bereft of *arahants*.”

In terms of the first statement, Adiccavamsa again deploys a liberal reading of the root text, taking the numbers referenced by the Buddha as more figurative than literal. In the *Cullavagga* (Vin II 256; see also A IV 278), the Buddha says that without the ordination of women, the *sāsana* would have lasted for 1000 years (P. *sahassam*), but due to the admission of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and the subsequent Sākyan women into the *saṅgha*, the *sāsana* would now last only 500 years. In Adiccavamsa’s interpretation of this passage, “because [the word] ‘*sahassa*’ is an indefinite number—the meaning says [something like] ‘many thousands’ [of years]” (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, 256). If we take the Pali word for “1000” to be an indefinite number, as Adiccavamsa suggests, it follows

then [that] in this *Bhikkhunī-khandhaka* [(Chapter on *Bhikkhunīs*) in the Vinayapitaka], the Buddha saying “*sahassam*” is merely [saying] ‘one thousand,’ it did not imply the [real] quantity. Actually, it is like weighing the pros and cons and [to teach otherwise] is like preaching [based on] an assumption (*parikappa*). The [correct] meaning is if in the event that the *sāsana* will have one thousand [of some ratio], by allowing women to be *bhikkhunīs*, the *sāsana* now will have 500 [according to the same ratio] only. It means that [the given duration] has decreased in half.⁴²⁰ (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, 255–56)

⁴²⁰ ထို့ကြောင့် ဤ ဘိက္ခုနီ ခန္ဓကဋ္ဌိ ‘သဟဿံ’-ဟူသည်မှာ ‘တထောင်’ ဟု ဘုရားရှင် အရေ အတွက်—မဆိုလို။ စင်စစ်ကား ပရိကပ္ပ ကြိဆ ဟောကြားခြင်း မျှဖြစ်သည်။ အဓိပ္ပါယ်ကား သူတော် တရားသည် တထောင်ရှည်မည့် အရာ ဖြစ်အံ့ မာတုဂါမတို့ သာသနာတွင် ရဟန်း ပြုခြင်းကြောင့် ယခု ငါးရာ သာ ရှည်တော့မည်၊ ထက်ဝက် ဆုတ်ယုတ်ရာသည် ဟူလိုသတည်း။ (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, 255–56)

In what we may call a creative reading of the root text, Adiccavamsa is claiming that the Buddha was not saying the *sāsana* will only last 500 years compared to 1000 if women had never been ordained, but rather, that it will merely decrease in half, with “1000” a sort of synecdoche for a long period of time, similar to how “10,000” is used as a rounded shorthand for an extremely large quantity in classical South and East Asian texts. Rather than lamenting the fact that women have decreased the life of the *sāsana*, Adiccavamsa’s point was that the Buddha was “weighing the pros and cons” of his decision, such that while the life of the *sāsana* will be decreased by half, it was still worthwhile to admit women because hypothetically, twice as many people will reach nirvana. To Adiccavamsa, this interpretation of the “indefinite” numbers given in the Tipiṭaka allows him the freedom to not only increase the lifespan of the *sāsana* beyond 1000 years, but to even transgress the commentarial limit of 5000 years. To claim otherwise and insist on these actual quantities is, in his opinion, to base one’s understanding on an assumption (P. *parikappa*), or perhaps more accurate for our discussion, on an assumption that has crystallized as received tradition. It is this very tradition that Adiccavamsa is questioning here.

Yet it is perhaps his reading of the second statement, the Buddha’s prediction to Subhadda, that is most critical for Adiccavamsa’s argument. According to him, “the word that was preached to Subhad[da] with the saying: ‘If these monks completely act according to the intention and live well, the world does not cease to have arahants’ is the word that shows the power of practice”⁴²¹ (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, 231). Adiccavamsa goes on to explain that according to the interpretation given in the Mil, “if there is practice, [the *sāsana*] continues to exist. The

⁴²¹ “ဤရဟန်းတို့ကောင်းစွာ ကျင့်ကြံ နေထိုင် ကုန်မှု လောကသည် ရဟန္တာ မ သုဉ်း ဖြစ်ရာသည်” ဟု သုဘဒ်အား ဟောသော စကားမူကား အကျင့်၏ အစွမ်းကို ပြသော စကား ဖြစ်၏ (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, 231)

fact that the *saṅgha* is keeping [the precepts] and as long as [this practice] does not disappear, it is likely that that noble *sāsana* will continue to exist and be prominent”⁴²² (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, 232). When glossing what he means by practice, Adiccavamsa follows the *Mil* and gives the Pali word *paṭipatti*, which has a wide range but can refer both to the moral life (P. *brahmacariyā*) and training in meditation. Elsewhere in this same passage, Adiccavamsa uses the Burmese word *kyan. vat* (ကျင့်ဝတ်), which means “code of conduct; rules of conduct; moral code” (MAA, s.v. ကျင့်ဝတ်). The idea of moral practice is the most obvious interpretation here, but by examining the account given in the *Ādiccavaṃsa atthuppatti* of Adiccavamsa’s argument, we see an orientation towards taking *paṭipatti* as rather more concerned with the practice of meditation. In discussing the Buddha’s prediction, Adiccavamsa’s biographer writes that

In like manner, after coming to know with all certainly the age of the *sāsana*, that by continuously and correctly keeping all [the Buddha’s] teachings of the good *dhamma* (*saddhamma*), we realize again that the *arahant* is incapable of ceasing to exist. Therefore, in this age, there are many people who carry out *paṭipatti* practice to attain nirvana, and [many] are doing so successfully.⁴²³ (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 27)

As reported by the biographer, the force of Adiccavamsa’s argument about the longevity of the *sāsana* is not just that the *sāsana* will last longer than 5000 years, but that *arahants*—beings who have reached *nibbāna* according to Theravada soteriology—still exist today. This interpretation runs counter to the commentarial understanding of the timeline of *sāsana* decay discussed in

⁴²² အကျင့် လျှင် တည်နေကြောင်း ဖြစ်၏။ ကျင့်ဆောင် လိုက်နာရေး မပျောက်ကွယ် သမျှ သာသနာတော် တည်ထွန်း နေပေလိမ့်မည် (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, 232)

⁴²³ ထိုသို့ သာသနာ့သက်တမ်းကို အမှန်အကန် သိလာရသည်နှင့်တစ်ဆက်တည်းမှာပင် သူတော်တရား “သဒ္ဓမ္မ” ကို မှန်ကန်စွာ ကျင့်ဆောင်နေသရွေ့ ရဟန္တာလည်း မဆိတ်သုဉ်းနိုင်ကြောင်းကိုပါ တစ်ပါတည်း သိလာကြပြန်သည်။ ထို့ကြောင့် ယခုဘဝ၌ပင် မဂ်ဆိုက်၊ ဖိုလ်ဝင် နိဗ္ဗာန်ကိုမြင်အောင် ပဋိပတ်လုပ်ငန်း လုပ်ဆောင်သူများလည်း ယခုအခါ အားရစရာ မြောက်မြောက်မြားမြား ပေါ်ထွက်လာပေသည် (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 27)

Chapter Six, which posits the stages of the path culminating in *nibbāna* as increasingly harder if not impossible to obtain as time moves forward. Indeed, it is implied in the commentary on the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, the *Manorathapūraṇī*, that the ability to reach *nibbāna* will disappear after the first two thousand years after the Buddha’s passing (Endo 2013, 129). Writing in the middle of the third millennium after the Buddha, Adiccavamsa is flouting the commentarial account of the disappearance of the *sāsana*, suggesting, at least according to his biography, that “if one really acts with [proper] intention and strives in the *paṭipatti* practice of the *vipassanā* [meditation] stages in conformity with the Buddha[’s teaching], one is able to become not only a stream-entrant (သောတာပန် *sotāpan*), a once-returner (သကဒါဂါမ် *sakadāgām*), or a non-returner (အနာဂါမ် *anāgām*), but an *arahant* (ရဟန္တာ *rahanta*) in the present” (Mrañ. chve [1965] 2017, 28). In this way, his *Bhikkhunī-sāsana-upadesa* not only advocates for reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* but for reimagining the whole life course of the *sāsana*.

8.7 Opening Up the Path

How does this question of what is and is not possible in the current *sāsana* age motivate the arguments for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*? To understand the relevance, we must return to the Mingun Jetavana and the Mil. According to the Mingun Jetavana’s disciples and those in his lineage, the rise of the lay-centred, mass-meditation movement dramatically transformed the landscape of the Buddha’s *sāsana* in twentieth-century Burma. In his own biography, the Mingun Jetavana’s erstwhile attendant, Tikkhacara, writes about how he views the role of his teacher in the history of Buddhism:

Now, it is exactly half of *sāsana*, as it is 2500 years after the Buddha’s demise. It exactly coincides with the Venerable Mingun Sayādawgyi’s 45-year mission accomplished by rediscovering and revealing the path of mindfulness that has now shone in all directions.

It is exactly during half of *sāsana*'s lifespan that [the Mingun Jetavana] rediscovered and revealed the Path to [Nirvana] to the people home and abroad. (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 129–30)

Note, first of all, the equivocation between the Buddha and the Mingun Jetavana here, namely, that the Mingun Jetavana's teaching mission is said to have lasted 45 years, the same length of time ascribed to the Buddha's own period of teaching in the Tipiṭaka. In making a further parallel between the Buddha and the Mingun Jetavana, Tikkhācāra cites a prediction (တဘောဇ် *ta bhoṅ*)⁴²⁴ said to be about his teacher, then offers a poem based on this prediction:

Almost half of *sāsana*, a peerless monk—endowed with great accumulation of merit and with profound wisdom powerful like *the weapon of diamond*—will appear on earth in the same way as Venerable Moggaliputta [from the *Kathāvatthu*] and Venerable Nāgasena [from the *Mil*].

He would set up the victory flag at the tip of the raft sailing it to [nirvana]. Anybody wishing to follow him should shine the light of mindfulness-based wisdom removing the darkness of delusion. Hypothetically, he may be on this planet just to represent the Buddha himself. (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 130)

By deploying and reinterpreting predictions around the half-way point of the Buddha's *sāsana*, his biographer and community of monastic and lay meditators elevate the Mingun Jetavana to be a stand-in for the Buddha, a crucial claim because in this position, part of the Mingun Jetavana's mission is not just to spread the practice of *vipassanā* meditation, but also to reinstate the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*—just as the Buddha did when first ordaining Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. Hence like Nāgasena, the Mingun Jetavana is a surrogate for the Buddha himself.

Aside from the equivalency set up between the Buddha and the Mingun Jetavana, what is also evident from the above narratives is that for praxis-based communities in twentieth-century Burma, *vipassanā* has opened up a new era in the history of the *sāsana*, “revealing the Path to

⁴²⁴ *Ta bhoṅs* (တဘောဇ်) are defined as “random utterances (of children, actors or madmen) interpreted as prophecies” (MMA, s.v. တဘောဇ်).

Nirvana” in the words of Tikkhacara. This path is one in which people could now attain stages of enlightenment perviously thought of as out of reach. The Mingun Jetavana mentions as much in the Mil-a when he is arguing for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, writing that “the true *dhamma* of spiritual attainments (*paṭivedha*) will last five thousand years,”⁴²⁵ meaning that the higher stages of the path are still possible in his own time, not just the pursuit of learning (P. *pariyatti*) or the outward signs of the religion (P. *liṅga-dhamma*). Adiccavamsa goes even further, citing the Ledi’s observation that there are no canonical teachings that preclude the possibility of attaining the *jhānas* or the *abhiññās* at present (Ādiccavaṃsa 1935, 232). Such viewpoints were not limited to these two monks alone, for in the words of Jordt, “there was social recognition of a corps of enlightened lay people whose status in penultimate terms marked them as a different class of beings altogether” (Jordt 2005, 49). As mentioned earlier, it was commonly accepted that there were millions of people in Burma who had, since the early 1950s, reached varying levels of enlightenment through the practice of *vipassanā* meditation. The majority of these were lay people, and the majority of these lay people were women. Hence “[t]he mass lay meditation movement has had the greatest significance for women because it has provided women with an alternative institution for practice, one that permits them access to the highest goals and achievements in the religion” (Jordt 2005, 50).

This trend was not lost on the Mingun Jetavana, especially because many of his foremost disciples were female. For instance, there is the example of Daw Kusala who practiced under the Mingun Jetavana as a lay women from 1909, eventually becoming a *thilashin* (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 124). Somewhat remarkable for a *thilashin*, who tend to focus more on

⁴²⁵ *pañcavassasahassān paṭivedhasaddhammo ṭhassati* (Mil-a 195,²⁻³)

scriptural learning over meditation (Htay Htay Lwin 2013, 64), Daw Kusala “established a meditation center where she had been teaching vipassanā meditation for almost 40 years. Even some monks practiced under her guidance. Thus she was a highly respected [*thilashin*]” (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 124). Though not disciples of the Mingun Jetavana directly, Htay Htay Lwin also mentions several other prominent *thilashin vipassanā* teachers, such as Daw Kummārī from Ayemyo Nunnery,⁴²⁶ who wrote the *Nibbāna-pavesanī kyaṃḥ* (*Treatise on the Entry into Nirvana*) in 1927 on how to practice meditation (Htay Htay Lwin 2013, 83).⁴²⁷ With such honored and presumably high-ranking female meditation teachers and practitioners, the possibility naturally arises that some of these women could achieve the ultimate fruit of Theravada soteriology, that of becoming an *arahant*. As Jordt explains, with the rise of the *vipassanā* movement, “enlightenment itself is no longer seen as the exclusive purview of the [male monastic] sangha” (Jordt 2005, 59). Herein lies the tension that people like the Mingun Jetavana and Adiccavamsa, I argue, were trying to address in their advocacy for the ordination of women as *bhikkhunīs*: being a female, defined de facto as outside of the *sāsana*, does not fundamentally bar one from becoming an *arahant*. Yet as Jordt has questioned, why are there then virtually no reports of female *arahants* in Burma, despite their obvious proficiency as lay meditators, and despite the “rather strong tradition of women anāgāmi (third stage enlightened beings)” in the country (Jordt 2005, 58)?

⁴²⁶ For more on this particular nunnery, see Saruya (2020).

⁴²⁷ According to Saruya, this Ayemyo Nunnery was established by “a nun from Mawlamyine [...] in 1908,” and while it has become a “leading educational center” helping *thilashins* pass the Pali exams, the original purpose was for it to act as a training center for meditation (Saruya 2020, 165).

The answer lies, not surprisingly at this point in our discussion, in another two-pronged question in the Mil. There is a passage in which King Milinda puts to Nāgasena the following dilemma in the Tipiṭaka: “Venerable Nāgasena, your people say: ‘Whosoever has attained, as a layman, to Arahāt-ship, one of the two conditions are possible to him, and no other—either that very day he enters the [monastic] Order, or he dies away, for beyond that day he cannot last’”⁴²⁸ (Mil trans. Rhys Davids [1894] 1963, II:96). This quote, as the translator Rhys Davids signals in a footnote, is so far untraced in any extant canonical material, meaning that it only survives in this text. Yet given that the Mil is included in the exclusive canon then emerging in Burma, this stipulation cannot be so easily dismissed. As Brohm shows, it even caused some tense moments in lay-meditation centres, as the following story from the 1950s illustrates: “Two young men were observed who had received their ordinations in great haste because they were adjudged to have achieved arahantship as laymen (adjudged, that is, by members of their meditational group). It was said that the layman who accomplishes such a rare and remarkable feat must enter the monkhood quickly ‘or die’” (Brohm 1957, 352). A similar anecdote from the translation of the *Selected Discourses of the Webu Sayadaw* concerns U Ba Khin, Chairmen of the Subcommittee for Paṭipatti at the BSNA during the independence period. In this role, U Ba Khin was receiving numerous reports from meditation centres throughout the country claiming “that there were a large number of Path and Fruition State winners ranging from teenage girls to elderly people,” which caused great concern amongst the “popular Pāli scholars” and government officials who formed the subcommittee (Bischoff [1992] 2003, 33). The inclusion of “teenage girls” in the lists of meditators reaching advanced stages of *vipassanā* practice must have been especially alarming

⁴²⁸ *bhante nāgasena, tumhe bhanatha: yo gihī arahattam patto dve v’ assa gatiyo bhavanti, anaññā: tasmim yeva divase pabbajati vā parinibbāyati vā, na so divaso sakkā atikkametum ti* (Mil 264,²⁹⁻³¹-265,¹)

to those on the subcommittee, since it upended both the lay-monastic and male-female divide in Burmese Buddhist soteriological hierarchies. We can only guess how many times this has happened at places like the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha (မဟာစည် သာသနာ့ ရိပ်သာ *mahācaññ sāsana. rip sā*) or “Meditation Centre of the Mahasi Order,” especially with almost a million people conventionally acknowledged to have achieved one of the stages of enlightenment since its founding. While this is a scenario that poses no real problem for men, who have a pathway towards ordination and can choose to continue living as *arahants*, what about for women?

As the Panditarama Sayadaw (ပဏ္ဍိတာရာမဆရာတော် Paṇḍitārāma Cha rā tau, 1921-2016; hereafter the Pandita), a disciple of the Mahasi and thus in the “teaching” lineage of the Mingun Jetavana, explains, “[h]aving eradicated craving, the arahat can continue to exist only if he is supported in the robes. Lay life requires motivations and actions that an arahat is no longer capable of experiencing in his psychophysical process. Accepting the food and resources of the laity make the extension of his life possible” (Jordt 2005, 59). Here, then, is a contemporary explanation of the passage found in the Mil, one that Nāgasena himself does not offer, but which accords to the *saṅgha*-centric paradigm of neo-conservative Burmese Theravada. A layman who becomes an *arahant* might not have the desire or “biological” drive to live but can enter into the merit economy of Burma and, out of compassion, become a rarefied field of merit for lay donors. In contrast, women, without the option of higher ordination, cannot rely on such support from the laity, and “thus have no [such] material institutions that could support them in this [enlightened] embodiment” (Jordt 2005, 59). In the absence of higher ordination, “if a woman today attains arahatship,” according to the Pandita, “she will take her *parinibbāna* (full Nibbāna) within seven days” (Jordt 2005, 59). In other words, because a woman cannot enter into the *sāsana* as a monastic and become a worthy field of merit, upon reaching the highest stage of the Theravada

path through meditation, she must surely perish within seven days, just as Nāgasena demands (though for him, it would be within the same day). Such an explanation from a mainstream monastic scholar like the Pandita explains why there are virtually no accounts of female *arahants* in twentieth-century Burma: because if they did reach to this stage, which is imminently possible, they have prematurely perished before word spread of their achievement.

It is therefore not difficult to see the glaring asymmetry here: women have as much potential as men to achieve the highest stages of meditation practice, but doing so would lead to their early demise. Thus despite the detailed textual arguments put forth by the Mingun Jetavana and Adiccavamsa, I submit that it is this asymmetry that ultimately motivated their advocacy. To support this conclusion, upon interviewing a high-ranking monastic figure in the lineage of the Mingun Jetavana, I was told that the real reason he pushed for the ordination of women was because of his compassion for his *thilashin* and lay women disciples, though this admission could not be found in print. Able to attest to their ability in meditation himself, and promoting his *vipassanā* method as one that could lead to nirvana in the present age of *sāsana* decline, the Mingun Jetavana saw it as his role as teacher to open up a path for women who had perfected their practice. To argue for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* was simply consistent with his larger program, a logical conclusion following his simplification of the *satipaṭṭhāna* method, his creation of the first set of meditation centres, and his composition of meditation manuals. In a sense, then, the Mingun Jetavana merely unleashed the “power of practice” mentioned by Adiccavamsa, a power which has created a set of paradoxes in Burmese Buddhist culture and doctrine that cannot be addressed by textual arguments alone.

Conclusion

It is thus not surprising that both Adiccavamsa and the Mingun Jetavana present their arguments for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* using the Mil, since this text is the quintessential site for working out the paradoxes found in the utterances ascribed to the Buddha spread across the Suttapiṭaka and Vinayapiṭaka. In this case, Adiccavamsa and the Mingun Jetavana deploy the Mil's analyses of apparently contradictory statements of the Buddha to mediate between accretions of textual interpretation and the fluid cultural landscape of Theravada soteriology in the twentieth century. Hence while I think Kawanami is right to suggest that “[m]any of the early initiatives to revive the *bhikkhunīs* have been instigated by educated monks and ambitious individuals who saw the need to introduce modern values of equality, justice and progress” into the *saṅgha* (Kawanami 2007, 242),⁴²⁹ an observation especially apt for someone like Adiccavamsa, I have tried to show above that there is another, equally important aspect to such efforts. The central question in this chapter, and one of the driving questions of the work as a whole, is what is and what is not possible in the present age of *sāsana* vitality, and for the Mingun Jetavana and Adiccavamsa, this question directly impinges on the spiritual capacity of women. Simply put, *vipassanā* had changed the role of women in terms of service to and practice of the *sāsana* by the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, the Mingun Jetavana was interested not only in re-establishing the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, but in reprising the *bhikkhunī-sāsana*, a co-equal but alternative means of salvation for half of the population. In principle, there is no distinction between male and female in the face of the *sāsana*, but in cultural and social practice, the

⁴²⁹ Nirmala Salgado (2013) is another scholar who sees the modern attempt at *bhikkhunī* revival in Theravada Buddhism as owing much to the creation of a western liberal subject, at least in terms of how scholars have dealt with the subject. Indeed, her intervention is important in trying to “decolonize” the discourse around *bhikkhunī* ordination, and her fieldwork is based extensively on interviews with Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs*.

difference is paramount. And this difference between principal and practice is precisely the Mingun Jetavana's point, that an attention to the role of practice in the *sāsana*'s vitality makes the renewal of the co-equal and parallel *bhikkhunī-sāsana* an imperative. Hence for the Mingun Jetavana, the intentions of the Buddha in laying down the *vinaya* rules around *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* needed to be reconsidered, or rather, recovered, in lieu of this transformation of soteriology through the practice of *vipassanā* and its emancipatory promise. It was the combination of the Buddha's omniscience, the *anāgata-bhikkhūnaṃ nayas* embedded in the Mil, and the Mingun Jetavana's ability to identify and explain such methods that made possible this radical act of recovery.

The Mingun Jetavana is thus not modern in the sense that he is interested in the liberal empowerment of women in society, at least there is no evidence of him having held this view. Instead, he is invoking the vehicle of *sāsana* reform to “formulate new interpretations of orthodoxy” (Turner 2014, 26). As Turner explains, “[t]he need to resist decline provided a reason to intervene—a powerful means for innovation in Burmese history. Thus, reform to preserve the *sāsana* became an engine of change, a technique of living and continually redefined orthodoxies” (Turner 2014, 26). The Mingun Jetavana's call to reinstate the *upasampadā* for women was one such intervention, and his modern reform movement of *vipassanā* provided him the opportunity to reformulate orthodoxy as he understood it and drive forward innovation and change. What is unique about the Mil-a, however, is that the *abhiññās* play an integral role in his vision of *sāsana* decline and vitality, animating his calls for reform and change. In a sense, then, there is nothing particularly modern about what the Mingun Jetavana is doing in his Mil-a, especially because the *abhiññās* are in many ways anathema to a modernist, rational, and sanitized presentation of Buddhist modernity. But on a deeper level, by invoking the *abhiññās* to intuit the intention of the

Buddha, the Mingun Jetavana is appropriating the history of the *sāsana* for himself, standing atop this history and claiming the ability to know the future of his own present. In collapsing the distinctions between the past, present, and the future, he is in fact being emphatically modern, a claim I will further unpack in the conclusion to follow the next chapter.

Aside from the ability to define and commandeer the intentions of the Buddha, the nature of the Vinayaṭaka is at stake in this debate over *bhikkhunī-upasampadā*, or more accurately, the relationship between the Vinayaṭaka and history. Schonthal points to the same stakes at play in the efforts around reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* over the last three decades in Sri Lanka: on the one hand, there is a conception of the Vinayaṭaka as “a contemporary text used by Buddhist monks,” one where the intentions of the Buddha have, for practical reasons, been imperfectly “filtered through the corrupting frame of tradition (*sampradaya*)” (Schonthal 2018, 24); on the other hand, the Vinayaṭaka represents “an ideal and timeless set of procedures and disciplinary norms existing before and outside of tradition” that operate beyond the vagaries of local hermeneutical regimes (Schonthal 2018, 24). It is to this second sense of the Vinayaṭaka, as ideal and timeless, that the Mingun Jetavana is committed and, I would argue, monks like Ashin Nandamālābhivaṃsa are more beholden to the localized hermeneutical regimes of which they are products. Ironically, it is his “timeless” approach to the Vinayaṭaka that allows the Mingun Jetavana to apply and adapt this set of texts to his own historical moment. The debate between text and history, however, is not limited to this issue, but strikes at the very heart of the neoconservative project of Theravada Buddhism in Burma, a project that centres around the canon-making process first discussed in Chapter One. What is the relationship between the Mingun Jetavana, his Mil-a, the mass lay meditation movement, and this larger project in mid-twentieth century Burma? In what ways does the publication and controversy around this

commentary reinforce this project while disrupting the aims of those involved, and what does the case of the Mil-a reveal about the history and future of neoconservative Theravada itself? Using the larger reception of the Mil-a against the backdrop of the U Nu Buddhist Revival project, I will explore these intertwined questions in the next and final chapter of this work.

9 Commentary in the News: Policing the Exclusive Canon in Post-colonial Burma

Introduction

As we have seen up to this point, the composition of Pali commentary is not an insulated act with consequences limited solely to scholarly circles or the confines of the cloistered monastery. The purpose of this chapter is to show that, instead, the production, dissemination, and consumption of religious commentary has the potential to provoke impassioned and fierce reaction from influential monastic cliques, powerful lay associations, and from the machinery of the state. What is extraordinary about the Mil-a is that many of the records of its reception still exist in libraries, archives, modern legends, and in living memory. Many of the reactions to this commentary have been invoked throughout this work, and this chapter is an attempt to contextualize these responses to the Mingun Jetavana's text in its historical moment, among what Juliane Schober calls the "modern Buddhist conjunctures" of mid-twentieth-century Burma (Schober 2011). My approach to this contextualization is to trace the critiques and support for the Mil-a in newspapers in 1949 and 1950, when the controversy reached its peak. To this end, in "Commentary in the News," the first section of this chapter, I place the reaction to the Mingun Jetavana's work against the politically charged atmosphere of newspapers in Burma during the first half of the twentieth century, a medium which has always been shaped by both religious and political motivations. While most of the coverage was critical of the Mil-a, I introduce in the second section a response to the critics by the Mingun Jetavana's disciple, the Insein Mingun, who calls for the convening of a council of learned monks to pass judgement on the text, a task the government was inherently unable to do in his eyes. To appreciate the significance of the

Insein Mingun’ request, the next section provides an overview of the U Nu administration’s Buddhist Revival program and its goal to forge a Buddhist unity for the newly independent nation. A major part of this program was the Vinicchaya Ṭhāna, or Monastic Courts Act from 1949, and a major player in the creation of the act was the Nyaungyan, a leading state-sponsored monk on a direct collision course with the Mingun Jetavana and his commentary.

In order for the Vinicchaya Ṭhāna Act to function properly, the court system it envisioned needed a singular and stable set of Pali texts with which to adjudicate “right” and “wrong” behavior among members of the *saṅgha*, hence in the fifth section I highlight the editing process for the Sixth Council, which along with the creation of a critical dictionary defining the semantic range of every Pali word in the Tipiṭaka, was meant to seal off the exclusive canon, a concept introduced in the first chapter, from any centrifugal language forces. Such centrifugal forces were epitomized by the Mil-a, which scholars accused of making mistakes in “grammatical rules which should not be wrongly,” a fact covered in the sixth section. At issue here, according to a newspaper labelling the Mingun Jetavana’s commentary as “outside the *sāsana*,” is that this text, with its fluid and undisciplined grammar, might disrupt the Pali examination system and result in inaccurate results for students or examinees who used it as a reference. Yet in the final section, “Stone Slabs and Structural Richness,” I argue that it was never the intention of the Mingun Jetavana to disrupt the Buddhist Revival project and challenge the monastic hierarchy. Rather, he saw himself as firmly within the neoconservative fold, as contributing to the campaign to produce an exclusive canon with his commentary, which in the eyes of the Mingun Jetavana’s followers, was a “scripture” that transcended the paper on which it was printed. Ultimately, then, what this chapter distills is the contradiction inherent in the efforts to seal the exclusive canon itself, which by a rigid delineation of the borders of the

Tipiṭaka, reveals the neoconservative project as a grand fantasy, always unravelling at the edges because of the very text meant to protect it.

9.1 Commentary in the News

Though print came relatively late to Burma in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, this technology was pivotal in shaping the development of Buddhism over the last century and a half. It is also clear that the inverse was true, as public discourse and debate about the role of Buddhism in a changing society shaped the way print developed, especially when it comes to the format of the periodical. In this way, the observation of Yan Naing Lin rings true, that periodicals, especially newspapers, “not only record events and history but also create[s] [...] [that] history” (Yan Naing Lin 2015, xxv). One example of the force of newspapers in shaping history is found after the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852, when King Mindon sought his own printing presses, “focusing on publications covering religion and law, published in two separate presses, as well as a newspaper” (Emmrich 2021, 13). This newspaper was christened by the Newspaper Press Act of 1873, which had the aim of publishing in both English and Burmese to reach foreigners in “friendly” countries and occupied Yangon, but also to promote “works of wisdom [...] on religion” (Than Tun 1989, IX:210). The act also contained a clause that encouraged the printing of the Tipiṭaka in Pali, stipulating that sets of the Tipiṭaka be “free of mistakes and omissions” and sold “at a comparatively low price” (Than Tun 1989, IX:210). As this examples shows, early printing in Burma had a decidedly religious slant, and indeed, “[u]ntil the 1920s, print publications remained overwhelmingly Buddhist” (Emmrich 2021, 14). Yet as King Mindon’s early experiment in publishing demonstrates, the rise of the newspaper in Burma involved the propagation of Buddhism as part of an overtly political agenda. In this sense,

then, the emergence of the medium of the newspaper in Burma often had an implicit political message, even when newspapers were covering only ostensibly religious matters.

This connection between religion and politics was so charged that several disputes between monastics and newspapers broke out into violence during the first half of the twentieth century. One relatively late incident in post-independence Burma, just a few years after the Mingun Jetavana published his *Mil-a*, was the “Oway incident” of 1951. As related by Brohm, an article in the Yangon-based, *Auih ve* (အိုဝ်းဝေ, an onomatopoeia for the cry of the peacock, a symbol of Burmese independence; hereafter, the *Oway*) newspaper “had criticized the conduct of monks who had been attending an arts and craft exhibition,” prompting a group of about fifty monks to storm the office of the newspaper “demanding the names of confidential informants who made the article possible. In the course of the ensuing refusal on the part of the newspaper staff, one journalist was beaten, a wall clock smashed and office furniture upset” (Brohm 1957, 310). The next year, in 1952, the socialist-oriented *Mran ma. lamḥ cañ* (မြန်မာ့လမ်းစဉ် *The Myanmar Way*) “had the temerity to criticize undisciplined monastic behaviour” in one of its editorials, leading “a large group of monks,” 200 according to some accounts, to enter the offices of the editor and “remonstrate with him in the ill-considered publication of his editorial,” which in their view made it difficult for sincere monks to secure *dāna* and maintain their livelihood (Brohm 1957, 310–11). These cases are just two of many such incidents, demonstrating the often-fraught conditions under which editors had to work when publishing material on monks and Buddhism in post-colonial Burma.⁴³⁰ In fact, the independence period saw perhaps not as

⁴³⁰ These editors were often political appointees, members of parliament, or ministers in U Nu’s cabinet. For example, Hugh Tinker points out that Tun Pe, who was “editor of [the] *Htoon*, formerly editor of *Bamakhit* and of *Hanthawaddy*, [...] served as Cabinet Minister from 1948 to 1953” (Tinker 1959, 80). Tinker adds that U Tin, also a

severe, but similarly restrictive measures on the press as under colonial rule,⁴³¹ since the raging civil war, American-backed Kuomintang insurgency, and nation-wide economic insecurity forced U Nu's government to severely limit press freedom (Yan Naing Lin 2015, 27). Yan Naing Lin remarks that under U Nu, “many journalists, writers and politicians were arrested and sentenced to the imprisonment for violating on the sub-article (124) of the Indian Penal Code of 1861” (Yan Naing Lin 2015, 29), while Hugh Tinker speaks about a “thick blanket of censorship” that descended on the newspapers in the “bad months of 1948 and 1949,” leading to a climate of self-censorship where editors sought government approval before publishing possibly sensitive topics (Tinker 1959, 78).

Such is the context in which the debates about the Mil-a raged in Burmese newspapers at the end of 1949. In his 1999 transliterated edition of this commentary, Deshpande, via Bapat, includes a newspaper article from the *Haṃsāvātī* (ဟံသာဝတီ; hereafter *Hanthawaddy*) dated November 8th, 1949 and titled “Sound of the Repercussion of the *Milinda[pañhā]-aṭṭhakathā*” (မိလိန္ဒကထာအတွက် ဂယက်သံ *Milinda aṭṭhakathā atvak ga yat sam*, discussing the controversy around the Mil-a (Deshpande 1999, 7–10). Along with an earlier iteration as the *Hanthawaddy Weekly Review*, the *Hanthawaddy* newspaper was part of a printing network which included a religious publishing house in Mandalay, which produced the first printed set of the Tipiṭaka in Burmese around 1900 (Myint Myint Oo 2011a, 105). Indeed, the Mil-a itself was first published by the *Haṃsāvātī piṭakat puṃ nhip tuik* (ဟံသာဝတီပိဋကတ်ပုံနှိပ်တိုက် *Haṃsāvātī Piṭaka Printing*

Cabinet Minister in U Nu's administration, was editor of the *Light of Burma*, which provided a great deal of support for the AFPFL in its pages (Tinker 1959, 80).

⁴³¹ Yan Naing Lin stresses, however, that after the Peasant Rebellion of 1930, the Press Acts were passed to control the role of newspapers in opposing British rule, and that a wave of repression on the press arose especially after the university strikes and religious riots in 1938 (Yan Naing Lin 2015, 126).

House).⁴³² In terms of the political connections of the *Hanthawaddy* paper, the editor was reported to “be a close friend of the Prime Minister [U Nu],” yet the *Hanthawaddy* was a frequent critic of U Nu’s administration and right of the government in political orientation (Tinker 1959, 80). It also had one of the highest circulations in Lower Burma, selling about 15,000 copies every day and reaching a sizeable audience in the Yangon region and “the railway towns of Upper Burma” (Tinker 1959, 80).⁴³³ Two more articles covering the controversy around the Mil-a are found in the *Hanthawaddy*, one from November 24th, 1949, titled, “The Problem with *Bhikkhunī* and *Kaṭhina*” (သိက္ခာနိဂ္ဂဟိတဝိနိပြုသနာ *Bhikkhunī nhañ kathin pra ssa nā*), the next coming two days later and provocatively titled “The *Milinda[pañhā]-aṭṭhakathā*: The Decision to Exclude it from the *Sāsana*” (မိလိန္ဒ အဋ္ဌကထာ: သာသနာမှ အပပြုရန် ဆုံးဖြတ်ခြင်း *Milinda-aṭṭhakathā: sāsana mha apa pru ran chumḥ phrat khrañḥ*).

The first article briefly reports a meeting at the “Caṅkāpū kyoṅḥ tuik” (စင်္ကာပူ ကျောင်းတိုက်, “Singapore Monastery”) in Yangon about a group of monastics discussing the controversial points of the Mil-a, namely, “the item of writing referring to the donation of *kaṭhina*, the item of writing referring to the obstruction of [receiving] *kaṭhina*, and the item of writing referring to the removal of *kaṭhina* [privileges], [after which those present] carried out a discussion about the duties of the state of the *bhikkhunī-sāsana*” (“*Bhikkhunī*” *Haṃsāvātī* 1949b,

⁴³² According to a newspaper article presenting the Insein Mingun’s defense of the Mil-a, the first run included 200 copies, but given that the same article states that 346 copies of the commentary were confiscated (see below) (Bha rī Ukkatṭha 1949, 15), there must have been several rounds of printing, or the article in question should have read “2000” rather than “200”.

⁴³³ For comparison, the *Ran kun ne. cañ sa thaṅḥ cā* (ရန်ကုန်နေ့စဉ်သတင်းစာ *The Rangoon Daily*), boasts to have reached a daily circulation of 17,000 in early 1950, stating as much at the bottom of its front page during this time.

15).⁴³⁴ There is no indication of any hostility towards or support for the Mil-a in this article, merely a note that during the meeting, a group of “sayadaws included below” was “conferred with full power to complete [the discussion and] to execute [their decision] in accordance with what is lawful (*dhamma kaṃ*)” (“Bhikkhunī” *Haṃsāvātī* 1949b, 15).⁴³⁵ Crucially, one of the “sayadaws included below” is listed as “Ashin Ādiccavaṃsa-tuik Sayadaw” (အရှင် အာဒိစ္စဝံသ တိုက်ဆရာတော် *Arhaṇ ādiccavaṃsa tuik cha rā tau*), which is possibly the same Ādiccavaṃsa mentioned in the last chapter, since “*tuik*” (တိုက်) is short for “*kyoṇḥ tuik*” (ကျောင်းတိုက်), meaning “monastic complex” and often denotes the founder of a given monastery. The second article records a scathing decision against the Mil-a by a group of lay scholars and high-ranking officials and will be discussed later in this chapter, as it offers clues to the larger motivations by the U Nu administration in censoring this commentary. What is fascinating is the fact that during the negative coverage, there are still articles or advertisements in the *Hanthawaddy* and other newspapers covering the Mingun Jetavana and his immediate disciples, such as articles welcoming the Mingun Jetavana as he arrives in Yangon by plane (“Mingun” *Haṃsāvātī* 1950, 16) or advertising “*dhamma talks*” (တရားပွဲ *ta rāḥ pvai*) by his disciples (“Vipassanā” *Haṃsāvātī* 1949a, 11; “Mingun” *Light of Burma* 1949; *The Rangoon Daily* 1950, 6), demonstrating the considerable media coverage the Mingun Jetavana and his community

⁴³⁴ ကထိန်လှူဒါန်းရာကိုဆိုလိုသော စကားရပ်။ ပလိဗေဓကို ဆိုသော စကားရပ်။ ကထိန် နှုတ်ရာကို ဆို သောစကားရပ်။ ဘိက္ခုနီ သာသနာရေးကိစ္စတို့ကို ဆွေးနွေးတော်မူကြပြီး ... (“Bhikkhunī” *Haṃsāvātī* 1949b, 15)

⁴³⁵ ... အောက် ပါ ဆရာတော်တို့အား ဓမ္မကံ နှင့် အညီ ပြီး မြောက်အောင်ဆောင်ရွက်ရန် အာဏာကုန်အပ်နှင်းတော်မူကြသည် (“Bhikkhunī” *Haṃsāvātī* 1949b, 15)

received in the largest dailies of Burma (see Table 1 for an overview of the newspaper coverage of the Mingun Jetavana).⁴³⁶

Table 1 Overview of articles appearing in three newspapers covering the Mingun Jetavana, from 1933 to 1955⁴³⁷

Date	Newspaper	Title or Subject
July 10 th , 1933,	<i>Light of Burma</i>	Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw Gives Orders to his Disciples
December 9 th , 1948	<i>Light of Burma</i>	Untitled (arrival of the mss of the Mil-a)
November 8 th , 1949	<i>Hanthawaddy</i>	Sound of the Repercussion of the <i>Milinda[pañhā]-aṭṭhakathā</i>
November 24 th , 1949	<i>Hanthawaddy</i>	The Problem with <i>Bhikkhunī</i> and <i>Kaṭhina</i>
November 26 th , 1949	<i>Hanthawaddy</i>	The <i>Milinda[pañhā]-aṭṭhakathā</i> : The Decision to Exclude it from the <i>Sāsana</i>
December 20 th , 1949	<i>Light of Burma</i>	A Speech Given by the Insein Mingun Sayadaw Gyi Regarding the <i>Milindapaññā</i> [sic]
February 3 rd , 1950	<i>Light of Burma</i>	Text of the Mingun Sayadaw to be Released
March 5 th , 1950	<i>Hanthawaddy</i>	Mingun Jetavana Arrives in Yangon by Airplane
May 7 th , 1954	<i>Light of Burma</i>	<i>Birth of Paṭipatti</i>
March 19 th , 1955	<i>Light of Burma</i>	Mingun Jetavana's Passing Away
March 26 th , 1955	<i>Hanthawaddy</i>	Obituary of the Mingun Jetavana
March 26 th , 1955	<i>Light of Burma</i>	Brief Biography of the Mingun Jetavana
March 27 th , 1955	<i>Light of Burma</i>	Cremation Ceremony of the Mingun Jetavana
March 28 th , 1955	<i>Light of Burma</i>	Obituary of the Mingun Jetavana
March 26 th , 1955	<i>Light of Burma</i>	The Virtues of the Mingun Jetavana
March 31 st , 1955	<i>Burma Times</i>	Special Edition Dedicated to the Mingun Jetavana

⁴³⁶ As seen in Table 1, the earliest mention of the Mingun Jetavana in a Burmese newspaper I have is from the July 10th, 1933-edition of the *Light of Burma*, while the last record I have consists of a special edition devoted to the life of the Mingun Jetavana after his passing in the *Burma Times* from March 31st, 1955. The funeral of the Mingun Jetavana was also covered by the *Hanthawaddy* in its March 26th, 1955-edition, but the *Mran mā. alanḥ* devotes the most coverage to this event, with at least four articles appearing from March 19th to March 28th, 1955.

⁴³⁷ Note this table does not contain references in all the Burmese newspapers during this period but gives an overview of the kind of press coverage the Mingun Jetavana received, and how his Mil-a figured in such coverage. As evidenced by Table 1, while there was initial coverage of the Mil-a at the end of 1948, the newspaper articles referring to the controversy that erupted occurred between November 8th and December 20th, 1949. It is possible that this short span was the result of government efforts to minimize or censor coverage of the controversy, especially after its confiscation, or perhaps the controversy died down rather quickly. The controversy over the *Milndapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* is however referenced in some of the obituaries that come six years later, in March of 1955, showing that this episode was still on people's minds when the Mingun Jetavana passed away.

9.2 Insein Mingun Jetavana Responds

While the *Hanthawaddy* has three articles in November of 1949 that are either neutral or report negatively on the Mil-a, there is one article in support from the *Light of Burma* from December 20th, 1949. Titled “A Speech Given by the Insein Mingun Sayadaw Gyi Regarding the *Milindapaññā* [sic]” (မိလိန္ဒပညာအတွက် အင်းစိန် မင်းကွန်းဆရာတော်ကြီး ၏မိန့်ကြားချက် *Milindaññā atvak añḥ cin mañḥ kvanḥ cha rā tau krīḥ *e min. krāḥ khyak*), the article contains a defense of the Mil-a and its author by the Insein Mingun, a direct disciple of the Mingun Jetavana first introduced in Chapter Five. Submitted by the head (ချုပ်ကြီး *khyup krīḥ*) of the Paṭipatti sāsana nuggaha asaṇḥ (ပဋိပတ္တိသာသနာနဂ္ဂဟအသင်း Paṭipatti Sāsana Nuggaha Association) in Yangon, the article begins by relaying how members of this association requested the Insein Mingun, who was then “residing at the sacred rest home of the high government official, Ūḥ Bharī, in the south-west section of the great Shwedagon Pagoda” (Bha rī Ukkatṭha 1949, 15),⁴³⁸ to address the confiscation of the Mil-a by the U Nu administration.

According to the article,

In the ninth month, on the ninth day of the waning moon [December 5th], with a warrant from the chief of police, Detective Inspector Ūḥ Bha kruiṇ himself, with about 4, 5, or 6 [other] police officers in tow, formally addressed the [Insein Mingun] Sayadaw, saying that he was permitted to confiscate the great treatise, the *Milindapaññā-aṭṭhakathā*, because about two or three paragraphs in this great book [were] causing unrest in the country. All together, there were 346 books that they confiscated, and taking [these], they left. (Bha rī Ukkatṭha 1949, 15)⁴³⁹

⁴³⁸ ရွှေတိဂုံဘုရားကြီးစနေဒေသနာဝန်မင်းဦးဘရီ၏ ရေလံ၌ သီတင်းသုံးနေတော် (Bha rī Ukkatṭha 1949, 15)

⁴³⁹ မိလိန္ဒပညာအဋ္ဌကထာကျမ်းကြီးကို နတ်တော်လဆုတ် ၉ ရက်နေ့က ပုလိပ်မင်းကြီး၏ အမိန့်ဖြင့် စုံထောက်အင်စပိတ်တော်ဦးဘကြိုင်ကိုယ်တိုင် နောက်ပါပုလိပ် ၄-၅-၆ ယောက်လောက်နှင့် စာအုပ်ကြီးထဲ၌ တိုင်းပြည် ဆူပူဘို့⁴³⁹အတွက် ၂ ပိုဒ်၊ ၃ ပိုဒ်လောက် ပါသဖြင့် သိမ်းရန်ခွင့်ပြုတော်မူပါဟု လျှောက်ထားပြီး ဆရာတော်၏ထံ၌ရှိသောစာအုပ်ပေါင်း ၃၄၆အုပ်ကို သိမ်းဆည်းသွားပါသည်။ (Bha rī Ukkatṭha 1949, 15). I wish to thank Naing Tun Lin for his help in refining my translation here.

From other sources, it appears there may have been several such police actions, as Bollée reports that altogether, U Nu had confiscated 1600 books from an initial run of 2000 copies.⁴⁴⁰ Yet despite his reputation as being hot tempered, the Insein Mingun’s tone in this article is respectful towards the officials who confiscated copies of the Mil-a, but after this event he corresponded with the Mingun Jetavana by mail and had the Paṭipatti Sāsana Nuggaha Association send 100 letters to leading sayadaws in Yangon explaining the situation (Bha rī Ukkaṭṭha 1949, 15). The Insein Mingun then defends the Mingun Jetavana on his two controversial proposals in the book concerning the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* and his reforms to the *kaṭhina* robe-giving ceremony, two issues that were causing such “unrest in the country.”

After offering a defense of the controversial proposals by the Mingun Jetavana, which amounts to more of a clarification of the Mingun Jetavana’s position and citations of the scriptural sources underlying his argument, the Insein Mingun proposes a means to deal with this unrest in a section of the article titled “A Desire to Request Loving-Kindness (*mettā*) from the Administration” (အစိုးရကိုမေတ္တာရပ်လိုသည်မှာ *acuih ra kui mettā rap lui saññ mhā*). He first emphasizes that “it is not yet the time to ask for this great book back from the administration. The administration confiscated the book not because it was mistaken, but actually, because [they] worried about the problem of unrest” (Bha rī Ukkaṭṭha 1949, 15). The point being made here is subtle but crucial: the Insein Mingun admits that the book may be causing unrest, but not because it is somehow flawed doctrinally or in its reading of Buddhist scripture. The implication,

⁴⁴⁰ Bollée, writing 20 years after the incident in 1969, cites as his informant on these matters the linguist, lexicographer, and civil servant Ṁh Hoke Sein (ဦး ဟုတ် စိန် Ṁh hut cin), known as the author of the *Pāli-Myan mā abhidhān* (ပါဠိ-မြန်မာအဘိဓာန် *Pāli-Burmese Dictionary*) (1956) and the *Amyāḥ sumḥ mran mā-aṅga lip-pāli abhidhān* (အများသုံး မြန်မာ-အင်္ဂလိပ်-ပါဠိ အဘိဓာန် *The Universal Burmese-English-Pali Dictionary* (1978) (Bollée 1969, 315 ft. 11).

an important one from the perspective of the Vinaya, is that the administration is in no position to judge that veracity of the Mingun Jetavana's arguments in the Mil-a, lacking the textual expertise to do so. "Therefore," as the request continues,

the [Insein] Sayadaw requests loving-kindness (*mettā*) from the administration, with the desire that the [administration] formally requests the honorable sayadaw *saṅgha* from Upper and Lower Burma to convene a meeting, and when the meeting has been held, that the sayadaws who attended the meeting appoint who they wish. Then, once those [appointed sayadaws] have finished reviewing and pondering the great treatise, the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*, once they are satisfied, after that time when they have made a decision about its rightness or wrongness, there is a wish for the administration to return this one great scripture.⁴⁴¹ (Bha rī Ukkatṭha 1949, 15)

This statement demonstrates that the Insein Mingun was not prepared to simply accept the decision by the administration to confiscate the publication of his teacher, yet he is also trying to find a means to resolve the situation in a manner acceptable to all sides of the debate. He adds that naturally neither the Mingun Jetavana nor the Mohnyin (introduced in Chapter Four and seen in Chapter Five as the monk who implored the Mingun Jetavana to compose the Mil-a) would attend this meeting, to ensure a measure of impartiality and objectivity in the proceedings. Signaling his commitment to such a meeting, the Insein Mingun assures in the final paragraph of the article that

If the sayadaws who attend the meeting decide that [the Mingun Jetavana's proposals in the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*] are wrong, [the Mingun Jetavana] will accept [their decision], and he is ready for the punishment by the [U Nu] administration. If they decide that the text is correct [in its interpretation, the Mingun Jetavana] wishes that the

⁴⁴¹ ဆရာတော်က အစိုးရကို မေတ္တာရပ်လိုသည်မှာ အစိုးရ၏ လျှောက်ထားချက်ဖြင့် အထက် အောက် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတော်ရှိ ဆရာတော်သံဃာတော်တို့အား စည်းဝေးစေပြီးလျှင် ထိုစည်းဝေးသော သံဃာတော်တို့က နှစ်သက်တော်မူကြသော ဆရာတော်များကို တင်မြှောက်၍ ယခု မိလိန္ဒပညာအဋ္ဌကထာကျမ်းကြီးကို ကျေနပ်သလောက် ကြည့်ရှုသုံးသပ်တော်မူကြပြီး အမှန်အမှားကို ဆုံးဖြတ်တော်မူသောအခါကျမှ အစိုးရက ကျမ်းစာအုပ်ကြီးကို ပြန်ပေးတာကို အလိုရှိပါသည် (Bha rī Ukkatṭha 1949, 15)

administration apologize for confiscating this text, because having done so was like removing a scripture from inside the *sāsana*.⁴⁴² (Bha rī Ukkatṭha 1949, 15)

We will return to the last clause of the final sentence below, but it is clear from his promise that the Insein Mingun has spoken directly with his teacher on this matter and is presenting the solution that both have agreed upon given the uproar over the Mil-a.⁴⁴³ While it is not known exactly how the administration responded, Andrew Huxley claims that “U Nu, alarmed at the determination of the [Mingun Jetavana’s] lay donors, returned the confiscated books to him” (Huxley 2001, 134), while Bollée, taking his information from U Hoke Sein, explains that “[w]hen the [texts] were returned later the author would not take back his books, because the then Government refused to give as much publicity to their release as to their confiscation” (Bollée 1969, 315). According to my own sources within the lineage of the Mingun Jetavana, the U Nu government eventually suggested that the Mingun Jetavana’s followers could come and retrieve the texts themselves, but that the Insein Mingun refused, demanding that the government personally return the books that had been seized, echoing Bollée’s claims. Eventually, the books were returned, though not until the Mingun Jetavana passed away, at least according to followers of the Mingun Jetavana alive today. It is not surprising that U Nu was “alarmed” by the reaction the seizure of the Mil-a provoked, for the article in question begins by referencing the “high government official, Ūḥ Bharī,” who appears to be the source of this submission to the *Light of*

⁴⁴² ထိုသမ္မုတိဆရာတော်များက မှားသည်ဟု ဆုံးဖြတ်တော်မူကြပါမူ တပြည်လုံးရှိ သံဃာတော်တို့၏ ပေးသောဒဏ်ကို ခံယူပါမည်။ အစိုးရများကပေးသော အပြစ်ကိုလည်း ခံယူရန် အသင့်ရှိပါသည်။ မှန်သည်ဟု ဆုံးဖြတ်တော်မူကြပါက ယခုကျမ်းကြီးကို သာသနာဝင် ကျမ်းစာတစ်စောင်အဖြစ်မှ ပယ်ထားသည်ကို နှုတ်သိမ်းပေးရန်အတွက် အစိုးရက တောင်းပန်ပေးစေလို ပါသည် (Bha rī Ukkatṭha 1949, 15)

⁴⁴³ According to a leading figure in the Mingun Jetavana’s lineage alive today, the Insein Mingun actually sent a letter to the Mingun Jetavana requesting that the latter remove from his Mil-a the controversial sections on reviving the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* (Mil-a 195-203), which would defuse the situation and ensure acceptance of this commentary by the monastic hierarchy. Apparently the Mingun Jetavana never responded to this request and evidence of such correspondence cannot be found today.

Burma and then head of the Paṭipatti Sāsana Nuggaha Association. Indeed, some of the Mingun Jetavana’s lay donors were themselves members of U Nu’s own government.

This submission appearing in a leading national newspaper and critical of the government’s response to the Mil-a is quite remarkable given the atmosphere of censorship at the time and the close relationship between the administration and the *Light of Burma*, managed as it was until 1947 by Ūḥ Tin (စည်သူ ဦးတင်, 1890-1972), a Cabinet Minister in U Nu’s administration (Tinker 1959, 80). It is also remarkable because what the Insein Mingun is requesting here amounts to an ad hoc monastic courts system to resolve the controversy over the Mil-a, of which the newspaper articles above are just one manifestation. Surely another manifestation of the controversy was the problems it posed to the U Nu administration, which was confiscating religious texts of a national monastic figure while at the same time supplicating this figure and patronizing his meditation lineage in the form of the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha. The situation amounted to a sort of two-pronged question for the administration itself, since it was faced with civil unrest among monks and their supporters, while at the same time not wanting to be seen as interfering directly in monastic affairs and making a judgement on Vinaya matters, over which monks claim, if only nominally, complete sovereignty.⁴⁴⁴ To fully appreciate the dilemma the administration faced over this text, we need to first take a step back and

⁴⁴⁴ The question of whether lay people like U Nu should even study the Vinaya was itself a controversial topic at the turn of the 20th century, with leading monks like the Shwegyin (see Chapter Four) and the Manle (introduced in Chapter Eight) arguing that “the Vinaya should not be studied by lay men” at all, lest they come to “condemn monks of misconduct” and “be responsible for attacking” the *saṅgha* (Nyein Chan Maung 2006, 18). In the other camp, the Okpho Sayadaw (အုဂ္ဂိုဏ်း ဆရာတော် *Aug puil cha rā tau* 1814-1905), a controversial figure in his own right (see Turner 2014, 121–23), argued that “lay men should study [the] Vinaya to be able to decide what a monk of misconduct was” (Nyein Chan Maung 2006, 18). As Nyein Chan Maung makes clear, at issue was whether giving to a monk who does not follow the Vinaya properly was meritorious or not, but the debate caused considerable uproar among the monastic establishment and provides some historical context on U Nu’s reluctance to weigh in on a text like the Mil-a.

understand the Buddhist revival program that U Nu was then beginning to implement and the role of monastic courts and the Tipiṭaka therein.

9.3 Buddhist Revival and the Vinicchaya Ṭhāna Act

Although he finished the Mil-a in 1941, the Mingun Jetavana did not publish it until 1949, waiting first for the chaos of WWII to subside. Coming a year after Burmese independence on January 4th, 1948, the Mil-a did not come at a convenient time for the new U Nu administration, however, since the uproar it caused was one of the first challenges to the government's nascent Buddhist Revival program.⁴⁴⁵ In its most tangible form, the “Buddhist Revival” as Mendelson (1975) calls it following Brohm (1957) and John Cady (1958), was a series of legislative and bureaucratic policies instituted by U Nu to ostensibly support Burmese Buddhism after more than 60 years of rule by an alien power if not hostile, then indifferent to the religion.⁴⁴⁶ Such

⁴⁴⁵ There is some debate about when exactly this program was first instituted, with Tinker claiming that given the socialist direction of the AFPFL and its on-going negotiations with communist factions in the country, “religion was given much less emphasis than Marxism” in the first few years of independence” (Tinker 1959, 166), while Brohm insists that “there seems no reason to believe that an active governmental role in a religious revival movement was conceived of in the early days of the Nu regime,” especially because “[t]he 1948 Cabinet contained no portfolio for Religious Affairs” (Brohm 1957, 370). Indeed, it was not until 1950 that the Ministry of Religious Affairs was established, signaling U Nu's focus on developing a national policy for Buddhism. U Win, who eventually served as the Minister of Religious Affairs until 1955 (Tinker 1959, 167), initially “occupied a relatively lowly position in the Cabinet status hierarchy in 1948” (Brohm 1957, 372), contrasting with his later preeminent position in U Nu's administration. However, as we will see below, one of the first pieces of legislation reflecting the larger religious policy of the government, the Vinicchaya Ṭhāna Act, was actually drafted in 1947, even before independence (Janaka Ashin 2016, 91), suggesting that the Buddhist Revival program had its roots in the very beginning of the administration, even if it was not explicitly articulated until later. It was perhaps not until the 1952 Pyidawtha Conference that the revival program was fully articulated, where U Nu put forth the “paramount need for unity and the importance of religion in its attainment” (Tinker 1959, 165).”

⁴⁴⁶ This “indifference” refers to the stated policy of neutrality espoused by the British in their dealings with religion in the colonies, weary as they were after the Sepoy Uprising of involving themselves in religious matters and sparking inter-religious conflict or enmity towards the ruling regime seen as favoring one group over another. For more on this “neutrality” and some of the problems it posed to colonial policy makers and agents on the ground, see Huxley (2001) and Kirichenko (2018).

policies included the creation of universities where Buddhism and Pali could be studied by both lay people and monastics, centralizing an examination and accreditation structure for monks training to teach Buddhism, promoting missionary activities in domestic, non-Bamar ethnic areas and abroad, creating a national registry for ordained monastics,⁴⁴⁷ designating Buddhism as the state religion, and the convening of an international, mass-recitation of the Pali Tipiṭaka, the so-called Sixth Council (P. *chaṭṭha saṅgāyana*). In a more abstract sense, the Buddhist revival was not only a means of securing electoral success for U Nu and the AFPFL, but the key to achieving a prosperous and independent Burma as he so envisioned. In putting forth and passing his Buddhist-oriented legislation during the parliamentary period, U Nu was attempting to leverage the ethical dimensions of the *sāsana* to improve the moral “hygiene” of the population,⁴⁴⁸ with the aim of creating an “enlightened citizenry” (Jordt 2007, 26) which would then be capable of becoming “responsible participants in *democratic society*” (Jordt 2007, 177) (italics in original).⁴⁴⁹ According to Nyein Chan Maung, this idea of promoting this form of “Buddhist

⁴⁴⁷ Such a registry, which reflected a religious-oriented governmentality of subsequent post-colonial Burmese regimes, proved a difficult task to complete, given the *saṅgha*’s intrinsic resistance to state oversight and control. Mendelson discusses, for example, how under U Nu, “progress on the general consensus” of monks from 1958-1960 “was so poor that no Sangha registration could have been efficient” (Mendelson 1975, 342). During the time of Ne Win, a 1965 attempt to implement a registry by the “All Sangha All-Sect Convention” was unsuccessful (Schober 2011, 165), while a similar “attempt to institute monastic registration in 1974 failed at first” (Schober 2011, 82). Even though a measure of success had been reached, there was a general “reluctance to comply” in later efforts, as “reflected in low 1984/85 census figures of approximately 300,000 registered monks” (Schober 2011, 83), but registration has been more robust under the auspices of the military than during the parliamentary period.

⁴⁴⁸ U Nu’s focus on the morality was not unique in the history of Burmese rulers, for as Leider points out, referring to a Royal Order from February 2nd, 1782, Bodawphaya did not only want to have a more disciplined and more knowledgeable monkhood. He also wanted to change the habits and the behavior of people and raise the moral standard of his subjects. About a week after he ascended the throne, the king decided that there should be no production, no selling, and no consumption of alcoholic drinks, of cannabis or opium” (Leider 2004, 95).

⁴⁴⁹ Matthew Walton has argued that the reason for this emphasis on improving the moral basis of the citizenry in Burmese political discourse stems from Buddhist concepts on human nature, which see the *pu thu jañ* (ပုထုဇာန်), or human being who is not on the supramundane path towards *nibbāna*, as hopelessly desire-driven and unable to overcome their sense of self to cooperate in democracy (Walton 2017). Walton links this view of human nature to

Unity” might have been suggested to U Nu by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, upon the former’s state visit to India in 1949 and the almost-immediate breakdown of a “Leftist Unity” initially promoted by the AFPFL (Nyein Chan Maung 2006, 33; see also Schober 2011, 79). What is crucial to understand is that this “enlightened citizenry” consisted of both the lay population and the sizeable population of the *saṅgha*, which had become during the colonial period a major player in the civil and political life of the country.⁴⁵⁰

A significant component of this revival targeted at lay people was the promotion of mass participation in *vipassanā* meditation and the institutionalization of such practice in the form of the meditation centre, the spiritual infrastructure “at the core” of U Nu’s “state-building project” (Jordt 2005, 47). According to Jordt, U Nu hoped that *vipassanā* meditation “would become the moral foundation for a shared communal experience” that eventually functioned to “unite the country according to the Dhamma and thereby underwrite a successful democratic nation-state” (Jordt 2005, 50). At the heart of this project was the Mingun Jetavana and his *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation method. Starting in 1911, the Mingun Jetavana built up a network of meditation centres in Burma reaching 105 affiliated sites by 1959, four years after his death, with several centres in Thailand as well (Bio trans. Hla Myint [1957] 2019, 127–28). One of the primary sites was located in central Yangon in an area rezoned by the U Nu government upon taking power as

the emphasis on “discipline” in Burmese conceptions of democracy, which is further reason why U Nu embraced the meditation centre as a site to instill such discipline in the population.

⁴⁵⁰ This is not to say that the *saṅgha* was not active in politics before this period, but perhaps it can be generally said that the political role of monks in the colonial area shifted, from one that supported a Buddhist polity within the palace walls and upheld a “Theravada hegemony” that served as the rationale for the economy as whole (Schober 2011, 4), to one where monks became a more conspicuous rallying point and vanguard for resistance to colonial rule, especially in the first few decades of occupation. Yet as Kirichenko cautions, the political role of monks during the colonial period was not just one of resistance, epitomized in figures like U Ottama (ဦးဥတ္တမ ။ Uttama 1879-1939), but also included “important examples of collaboration and innovative adaptation” (Kirichenko 2018, 156).

land dedicated for the construction of religious complexes. Built in 1950 and named simply the *Mañḥ kvaṇḥ kyoṇḥ taik* (မင်းကွန်း ကျောင်းတိုက်), or the Mingun Monastic Complex, its construction was commissioned by U Nu himself with the Insein Mingun as its first abbot. Yet rather than promote this site as the centre of *vipassanā* meditation in Burma, U Nu and U Thwin set up a centre for arguably the Mingun Jetavana’s most prominent student, the Mahasi. One Burmese newspaper article from 1954 describes the centres overseen by the Mahasi as “the fruits, tendrils, and the branches coming from” the Mingun Jetavana (Cam rhanḥ 1954, 14). The primary meditation centre in this network, known today as the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha (မဟာစည်သာသနာ့ရိပ်သာ *mahāsaññ sāsana rip thā*), was built on land donated by the wealthy merchant Sir U Thwin in September 1949, with the Mahasi being personally invited to take up the role as teacher by U Nu himself in November of that same year (Tin Than Myint 2008, 41).⁴⁵¹ U Nu is said not to have taken this decision before first consulting the Mingun Jetavana, even asking the elder monk if he would take up the post himself, most likely out of respect given the Mingun Jetavana’s advanced age and unsuitability for missionary activity at that time. With the centre drawing largely from the urban middleclass, the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha transformed the landscape of Theravada soteriology in the country, for it had become “a socially recognized and accepted orthodox assertion” that potentially “millions” of practitioners have achieved higher stages of spiritual attainments at the Mahasi’s centre since its founding in 1948 (Jordt 2005, 48), partly realizing the vision of U Nu’s Buddhist unity, at least in terms of the lay populous.

⁴⁵¹ The Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha was set up not by the government directly but by a “para-governmental” organization, the BSNA, which included among its members Prime Minister U Nu.

In this indirect sense, the Mingun Jetavana was a key figure who made the revival possible, and while he was not ostensibly active in politics himself, the mass lay meditation movement he inspired was used by U Nu as a “normative *description* for state-society relations” (Jordt 2007, 92) (italics in original), the active component of the “Pyidawtha” (ပြည်တော်သာ *praññ tau sā*), which Mendelson describes as “U Nu's vision of the ideal state in which people and government live in happy cooperation” (Mendelson 1975, 264).⁴⁵² Central to this vision of U Nu was what Jordt calls the “underlying monarchical allegory of postwar Burmese politics” (Jordt 2007, 212), an allegory that understands the ideal sovereign as the protector of the *sāsana*, even if this means against the *saṅgha* itself. According to this framework, a monarch with enough concentration of power was responsible for purging the *saṅgha* of monks who had become lax in their commitment to the tenets of the Vinaya, even by force if necessary.⁴⁵³ The teleological assumption of this allegory is that the *sāsana* is not just in a state of perpetual decline, but that the *saṅgha* is constantly tearing itself asunder through in-fighting and lack of monastic discipline. In this way, the *saṅgha* is both the source of the *sāsana*'s longevity and its

⁴⁵² This vision was most clearly articulated in the Pyidawtha Conference of August 1952 (Nyein Chan Maung 2006, 36). In this conference, U Nu put forth his “Pyidawtha Plan (ပြည်တော်သာစီမံကိန်း: *praññ tau sā cī maṃ kinḥ*), which Tharaphi Than translates as a plan for a “Happy Land” (Tharaphi Than 2013, 639). The plan itself was an attempt to build an industrial, post-imperial welfare state, which would be crucial to “win the hearts and minds of the rural poor” and ensure victory in the “then ongoing war against the communists” (Tharaphi Than 2013, 639). The role of religion was not so much a material component of this plan as ideological, meant to appeal to the Buddhist affiliations of the rural poor and present U Nu as the champion of their tradition vis-à-vis the explicitly secular communist factions then vying for control in the country.

⁴⁵³ One of the paradigmatic examples in Burmese history was the case of the one-shoulder-two-shoulder debate that involved the proper way for novices to wear the monastic robes outside of the monastery grounds. Though a seemingly minor point, these debates played themselves out in the royal court and spanned the reign of several kings, “splitting the monkhood since 1698” (Leider 2004, 92). Leider explains that “[u]nder King Singu (1774–1781),” the dispute appeared to have been settled, but Bodawpaya “re-opened the case” and the one-shoulder faction was found at fault, not least because the text they relied on to support their views was found to be outside the Tipiṭaka (Leider 2004, 93). As a result, the leader of the one-shoulder faction was declared by the king “a dangerous thorn to the Sāsana,” and it was ordered that he be “unfrock[ed] and drag[ed] [...] away to his own village amidst the beating of drums” (Pranke 2004b, 258).

most pressing threat. Such a threat was even more pronounced at the end of colonial rule, or at least it so appeared, for as the scholarly narrative goes, “[a]t Independence, Burma’s political and religious leaders inherited this contentious and fissiparous Sangha which was extremely difficult to deal with” (Aung-Thwin 2009, 13). Implicit in this quote by Michael Aung-Thwin is that 60-plus years of British rule and their policy of neutrality towards religion encouraged the more liberal elements of the *saṅgha* to ignore or even rebel against any form of authority, whether wielded by other monks or the state, especially in the absence of a *thathanabaing* (သာသနာ့ပိုင် *sāsanā puin*), or state-sponsored central authority. As Kirichenko has convincingly argued, however, this “capsule description” of colonial disruption is “more of a history of knowledge production in colonial discourses and academic research on Burma,” rather than reflecting the actual breakdown of a unified monastic hierarchy (Kirichenko 2018, 138). In other words, the truism that the *saṅgha* became “unwieldy, ill-disciplined, lawless, and politicized” (Aung-Thwin 2009, 13) was premised on the false notion that it had ever been otherwise. Yet while the idea of a schismatic, rebellious *saṅgha* in contrast to some pure unified predecessor might have been the product of colonial discourse and knowledge productive, such a narrative also served U Nu’s agenda,⁴⁵⁴ allowing him to cast himself as the sovereign capable of purifying the *saṅgha*, the first

⁴⁵⁴ In this respect, U Nu was not the first Burmese leader to invoke this narrative, as it was a conceit used by each new king in the Konbaung Dynasty to varying degrees to implement their own reform programs. For example, Jacques Leider writes that upon coming to power, Bodawpaya “was not only critical of the monastic practice and the quality of textual knowledge of the monks. He also took an extremely critical stance toward the validity of the religious texts as they existed in his time because he doubted that the Buddhist scriptures had been faithfully transmitted over the generations” (Leider 2004, 88). As a result, Bodawpaya embarked on an ambitious textual revision process, “form[ing] monastic commissions and committees with dozens of chief editors and auxiliary monks to revise the texts” he thought untrustworthy (Leider 2004, 98).

step of which was the Vinicchaya Thāna Act (ဝိနိစ္ဆယဌာနအက်ဥပဒေ *vinicchaya thāna ak upade*),⁴⁵⁵ or the Monastic Courts Act.⁴⁵⁶

At the heart of this piece of legislation was the establishment of a series of local and regional courts staffed by monks who were ultimately answerable to a single body of the most senior monastics with at least 20 years of experience. Reflecting the democratic aspirations of the early parliamentary period, these austere jurors were originally to be selected, according to Huxley, by “universal monastic suffrage,” a stipulation eventually abandoned to win the support of minority sects striving to maintain “their nonconformist status” (Huxley 2001, 134). Cases covering monastic heteropraxis,⁴⁵⁷ land disputes, inheritance law, even monks implicated in criminal conduct, were first brought to the local monastic authorities most immediately concerned, passing “from the township through the district up to a Supreme Court” upon appeal (Tinker 1959, 167), where the final decision would be made by a purportedly unimpeachable set of *vinayadharas*, or utmost experts in the monastic code. Eventually, such a “Supreme Sangha

⁴⁵⁵ The final word *upade* in the title of this act comes from the Pali *upadesa*, which is translated as “the pointing out, indication; direction, instruction, teaching” (CPD, s.v. *upadesa*). As Christian Lammerts explains, *upade* forms of legislation represent a “new type of written law” that came out of the contact between royal and colonial legal spheres (D. Christian Lammerts 2018, 178). He writes that “[*u*]pade was at once an outgrowth of the tradition of royal orders and a reflection of the ‘modernizing’ administrative capacities of the king and his appointed lawmaking and judicial organ, the *hluttaw*. This *upade*-type legislation, some of it even drafted by Europeans resident in the kingdom, was supported by *piṭakat* precedent as much as it was informed by colonial codified law (and much else) in British India” (D. Christian Lammerts 2018, 178).

⁴⁵⁶ In his conclusion, Mendelson sees the revival on the whole as an invocation of “the old idiom of ‘purification,’” reducing it to “basically a disciplinary action on the part of Nu’s government” (Mendelson 1975, 355). I think this reading is an oversimplification of the complex politics U Nu was navigating and ignores the way the mass lay meditation movement had changed the Buddhist landscape in the twentieth century, especially in terms of the narrative of *sāsana* decline.

⁴⁵⁷ What makes such a court system different than those of previous centuries, at least according to Janaka Ashin, is that their jurisdiction was not seen to cover only Vinaya matters, but also on aberrations in doctrine (Janaka Ashin 2016, 48). This new concern for such courts is perhaps best represented by the case of Ukkattha introduced in Chapter One and referenced in Chapter Eight, who was convicted of having a mistaken view of human rebirth influenced by Darwinian evolution, namely, that once born a human, one would not regress to lower planes of existence in subsequent rebirths (Janaka Ashin 2016, 214).

Council was established in 1950-51” (Janaka Ashin 2016, 92), which oversaw 14 sub-councils consisting of “five in Rangoon, five in Mandalay and four in Sagaing” (Brohm 1957, 377). The hope, evident in the Insein Mingun’s request to the administration above, is that given the indisputable authority on Vinaya matters of those monks sitting at the top of this structure, parties to a given conflict would submit to any decision handed down. In reality, however, while seniority was necessary for appointment to this highest council, this criterion did not always translate into members being “fully conversant with the law,” at least according to the mostly Shwegyin (ရွှေကျင် *rhve kyan*) and Dwaya (ဒွါရ *dvāra*) critics, who largely refused to accept the universal jurisdiction of the courts after initially supporting the endeavour (Tinker 1959, 167). Hence while U Nu’s vision for this legislation was to centralize the monastic court system, he ultimately failed, with the structure he created resembling the Thudhammā council of the Konbaung Dynasty, with a limited reach stretching only as far as the sects already willing to accept some form of state oversight.⁴⁵⁸

First drafted in 1947 even before independence (Janaka Ashin 2016, 91), the Vinicchaya Thāna Act was eventually passed into law in 1949, followed by amendments in 1951 and 1954. The successful enactment came on the heels of failed efforts to implement similar legislation in the mid-1930s to “empower a court” of senior monks “to settle civil suits” arising among the *saṅgha* (Maung Maung 1980, 117).⁴⁵⁹ Such efforts in the 1930s were in response to the “*saṅgha*’s subjection to the civil courts” under British rule (Kirichenko 2018, 156), which

⁴⁵⁸ Janaka Ashin remarks that while U Nu largely supplicated the Thudhammā in the creation of his monastic court system, “there was a tendency for members of the military to be supportive of the more strictly *vinaya*-oriented *Shwegyin Gaing*,” who dominated the later State Saṅghamahānāyaka Committee (Janaka Ashin 2016, 156).

⁴⁵⁹ For more on this attempt, led by Sir Joseph A. Maung Gyi from 1934 to 1936, see Kirichenko (2018, 149–50).

through a series of court rulings⁴⁶⁰ had effectively stripped the monastic authorities, especially the *thathanabaing*, of the ability to rule against purportedly misbehaving monks, or more accurately, of any means to have their decisions actually enforced through state apparatuses and the threat or exercise of violence. At dispute in these cases was, naturally, precedence, or rather, the question of where precedence was to be sourced. In a watershed moment in 1924, Justice Carr resolved a litigation between two monks by referring to the *dhammathats* (ဓမ္မသတ် *dhammasat P. dhammasattha*), extra-canonical, vernacular law texts reflecting the will of Burmese kings and local convention, combined with Carr’s “own knowledge of how Burmese monks actually behave,” instead of deferring to the “accumulated *vinaya* literature” originally in Pali and interpreted through centuries of vernacular commentary and subcommentary (Huxley 2001, 131).⁴⁶¹ This juridical preference for citing vernacular law codes over the Vinaya was a major blow to the *saṅgha* hoping to exercise self-enforcement, but such a move was one way for the British magistrates to excise themselves from the often-intractable debates between rival monastic groups, who “increasingly turned to the authority of canonical and commentarial texts” when trying to settle disputes between themselves (Janaka Ashin 2016, 16).

⁴⁶⁰ In fact, Huxley (2001) explains how there were two periods of ecclesiastical law in Burma, one in which, from 1886 to 1918, courts continuously backed the right of the *saṅgha* authorities to enforce their decisions on monks, whether they be in terms of monastic discipline or property disputes, and the period from 1918 to 1942, where this trend was reversed and the rights of individual monks to dissent was recognized by giving precedence to secular proceedings over Vinaya-based decisions. As a sort of climax of this second trend, Kirichenko explains how, “[i]n 1935, amid the public debate on legislation necessary to establish ecclesiastical courts, a ruling passed by the High Court in Rangoon completely deprived the *thathanabaing* of power to settle disputes between monks” (Kirichenko 2018, 141).

⁴⁶¹ Citing the court’s judgement, Huxley adds that Carr’s reasons for negating the validity of Vinaya in public courts were “crudely positivistic,” namely, that “[l]aws are rules of civil conduct enforced by the State. And, since the rules of the *vinaya* were not enforced by the State, they were not laws in the proper juridical sense of the word” (Huxley 2001, 132), a somewhat circular argument, because it was Carr himself who was deciding not to enforce such rules.

The same can be said for U Nu and the Vinicchaya Ṭhāna Act, for while it essentially reversed Carr’s much-maligned decision and (re)established the Vinaya as the ultimate arbiter of monastic law, this legislation was also designed to free the government from having to make any pronouncements on the nature and contents of the Vinaya itself, a fraught process liable to make the administration as many enemies as allies in the *saṅgha* and its political blocs, evidenced by the reaction to the seizure of the Mil-a. Explaining a similar law passed in Sri Lanka in 2016, the Katikāvata Bill, Schonthal describes such legislation as “a safe instrument of transaction, allowing for the state-legal recognition of Vinaya-derived norms without giving the government unfettered legal powers or authority to determine those norms” (Schonthal 2018, 33). This kind of legislation is safe for both sides because the Vinicchaya Ṭhāna Act gave monks exclusive jurisdiction over ecclesiastical matters and ensured their decisions would be enforced by bureaucratic agents and ultimately the police, like those who confiscated the Mil-a, while the administration could assume the role of *sāsana* protector, appearing to merely perform its duty in carrying out the will of the monks when acting to tamp down the uproar caused by someone like the Mingun Jetavana. The act was thus meant to delimit overlapping but discrete spheres of sovereignty, “ensur[ing] that as the Burmese people should rule over Burma so the Sangha should also rule over the Sangha independently after the Independence of the country” (Janaka Ashin 2016, 91). The motivation for U Nu in promoting this legislation, then, was probably not so much an attempt to arrive at some final conclusion firmly grounded in canonical precedent as much as a “desire to minimize the visibility of disputes and conflicts with the monkhood, as a way of protecting the image of Buddhism more broadly” (Walton and Aung Tun 2017, 9). Afterall, the Buddhist unity that U Nu was striving for at a national level would be gravely undermined if it could not be achieved in the *saṅgha* itself. While Matthew Walton and Aung

Tun are referring to the later court system instituted under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (နိုင်ငံတော်ငြိမ်ဝပ်ပိပြားမှုတည်ဆောက်ရေးအဖွဲ့ *nuiñ ñam tau ñrim vap pi prāḥ mhu taññ chok reḥ aphvai*, 1988-1997; hereafter SLORC) after 1988 and headed by the State Saṅghamahānāyaka Committee (နိုင်ငံတော်သံဃမဟာနာယကအဖွဲ့ *nuiñ ña tau saṅgha mahānāyaka aphvai*.), the same court that eventually tried and convicted Ukkatṭha and Saccavādī, their insight is especially apt for the case of the Mil-a, since U Nu had to both mitigate the uproar over the text while maintaining the legitimacy of the Mingun Jetavana in whose technique the mass lay meditation movement was grounded.

9.4 Nyaungyan Sayadaw

In the many iterations of the Vinicchaya Ṭhāna Act in Burmese histories, the question ultimately becomes, who is given the power to decide what is orthopraxis and what is deviant behaviour? In the case of the U Nu administration, much of this power fell to one man: the Nyaungyan, first encountered in Chapter One. As the *raṭṭhaguru*, or “national teacher” of the dominant Thudhammā sect (Mendelson 1975, 285), the Mandalay-based Nyaungyan was as close to a *saṅgharāja* (“king of the *saṅgha*”) or *thathanabaing* as there would be during the parliamentary period. He was the monk most active in U Nu’s Buddhist Revival program and was thoroughly integrated into the bureaucratic machinery of the nascent independent state.⁴⁶² Having been awarded the title of “Abhidhajamahāraṭṭhaguru” (the utmost great national teacher) by the British

⁴⁶² Indeed, for some of his critics, the Nyaungyan become too political, overstepping the realm of acceptable behaviour for a monk. Mendelson recounts how a series of problems in the Nyaungyan’s funeral celebration, including the failure of machinery and adverse weather, were taken by some critics as “the predictable result of a political monk’s overextension of his proper role, not just as unfortunate happenstance” (Mendelson 1975, 285).

in 1934 (Thet Thet Nyunt 2011, 55),⁴⁶³ perhaps the most prestigious and exclusive title in all of Burma, the Nyaungyan was seen as one of the most accomplished scholar monks at the time of independence. He was thus almost immediately recruited by U Nu as the monastic imprimatur of many committees set up to carry out the Buddhist Revival program, most notably, as the mahānāyaka, or “great leader” of the Buddha Sāsana Council, a mostly lay organization at arm’s length from the government that grew out of the Buddha sāsana nuggaha aphvai (ဗုဒ္ဓသာသနာနွဂ္ဂဟအဖွဲ့. Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Association, introduced in Chapter Six as the BSNA) and whose task it was to “centralize and choose among the various programs initiated by outside agencies” related to the revival efforts (Mendelson 1975, 265). Touching on other aspects of U Nu’s program, the Nyaungyan was also chairperson of the government’s entry-level Pali examination, or “*Pa-hta-ma-byan* Inquiry Committee” (Aye Aye Chaw 2010, 82), and chaired the first meeting in 1951 for drafting legislation to develop a Pali university system (Swe Zin Aye 2000, 115). Crucially for our purposes in this chapter, the Nyaungyan was a lead figure for the committee that drew up plans for what would eventually become the Vinicchaya Ṭhāna Act (Aye Aye Chaw 2010, 82), eventually serving on the head council of jurors established in 1951.

This last role put the Nyaungyan on a direct collision course with the Mingun Jetavana. Members of the latter’s lineage still cite the Nyaungyan’s opposition as one of the major reasons for the state’s censorship of the Mil-a, and while I was not able to find any documents linking the

⁴⁶³ According to a committee set up by U Nu in 1953, of which the Nyaungyan was, not surprisingly, a member, to receive this title, which was only awarded 11 times between 1951 and 1962 compared to 108 times for the title of “Aggamahāpaṇḍita” (foremost great scholar) (Thet Thet Nyunt 2011, 27), to become an Abhidhajamahārattḥaguru, a monk had to already have received the title of Aggamahāpaṇḍita, have forty rains of monkhood, possess extensive learning, and have composed religious texts beneficial to the lay and monastic population (Thet Thet Nyunt 2011, 32).

Nyaungyan to the ordering of the confiscation in the National Archives of Myanmar (the year 1949 missing in its entirety for the Ministry of Religious Affairs, then known as the Department of the Sāsana (သာသနာရေးဌာန *sāsana reḥ ṭhana*) under the Ministry of Information (ပြန်ကြားရေးဝန်ကြီးဌာန *pran krāḥ reḥ van krīḥ ṭhāna*)), a brief survey of the Nyaungyan’s oeuvre suggests that both monks were writing about two of the same issues that made the Mingun Jetavana’s commentary so controversial. All told 132 works are attributed to the Nyaungyan, the bulk of which are dedicated to matters of monastic discipline (Aye Aye Chaw 2010, 159–60). There are at least six works on *kaṭhina* judging by their titles (Aye Aye Chaw 2010, 159–63), which is not surprising in itself given the importance the *kaṭhina* ceremony has in Theravada societies, but does suggest that the Nyaungyan would have been highly sensitive to if not critical of the Mingun Jetavana’s suggested *kaṭhina* reforms in the Mil-a. Listed as work 71, the Nyaungyan also composed a *Bhikkhunī Vinicchaya* (*Judgement on [the Issue of] Bhikkhunīs*) (Aye Aye Chaw 2010, 161), perhaps in response to the controversy sparked by Ādiccavaṃsa in the mid-1930s.⁴⁶⁴ As mentioned in Chapter One, the Nyaungyan composed a Burmese text, the *Milindapañhā-netti-peṭakopadesa-saṅgīti Vinicchaya* (*Judgement on the Recital of the Peṭakopadesa, Netti[pakarāṇa], and Milindapañhā*) (Aye Aye Chaw 2010, 163), which was meant to outline his reasons for why these three texts should be included in the Pali canon during the Sixth Council recitation. Immediately after, as number 106 in the list of the Nyaungyan’s works, Aye Aye Chaw gives the *Milindapañhā-vāda-otaraṇa-kathā* (*Discourse Entering into the Theory of the Milindapañhā*) (Aye Aye Chaw 2010, 163), demonstrating the Nyaungyan had a

⁴⁶⁴ Aye Aye Chaw does not explain the rationale behind how she orders these texts in her dissertation, but given the placement of some of the texts compared to events in the Nyaungyan’s life (specifically those on the Mil, which would have towards his passing), and the fact that the last entry is given as the Pali “*obhāsas*” (“lustres”) (Aye Aye Chaw 2010, 164), meaning obituaries, it appears she is following a chronological order.

keen interest in this text. Given his interest in the Mil, the Nyaungyan was surely aware of the controversy over the Mil-a, which erupted a mere two years before the editing process of the Sixth Council began in 1952 (Nyein Chan Maung 2006, 35). Indeed, as mahānāyaka of the Buddha Sāsana Council, the Nyaungyan oversaw this editing process, and presided over the actual proceedings of the Sixth Council as its president from 1954 until his death the following year. In this role, the Nyaungyan was also laying the groundwork for the Vinicchaya Ṭhāna system, because in order to use the Vinaya and other Pali texts to adjudicate orthopraxis and orthodoxy, there needs to be a stable, standardized set of texts, which was the goal of the Sixth Council to produce.⁴⁶⁵

9.5 Sixth Council: Sealing the Pali Canon

The goal of U Nu’s revival program was the forging of a Buddhist unity that could flatten the diverse political and ethnic differences in the country and act as a shared wellspring for the ideology of an “enlightened citizenry” in the union. Whether the Vinicchaya Ṭhāna Act, the Pali university and examination systems, the hill-tract missionizing efforts, or even the mass lay meditation movement, the key to bringing about this unity was to ensure there was a single, incontrovertible set of Pali texts that could serve as the material basis for the concept of an exclusive canon. Part of the reason for this requisite was due to the very nature of a legal code, for as the Buddhist revival was in concrete terms a legislative agenda that required a bureaucratic

⁴⁶⁵ This fact is a major insight by Janaka Ashin (2016), who focuses on the cases that have been brought to the post-1980 State Saṅghamahānāyaka Committee. He writes that “the procedures in such cases take the canonical texts, in the form agreed at the Sixth Buddhist council in 1954-56, as their benchmark against which to test such doctrine and discipline. During each trial, the [committee] questions the accused in accordance with the report of the accuser, and scrutinizes their position referring to canonical texts” (Janaka Ashin 2016, 186).

infrastructure to implement and enforce, there needed to be a textual substratum that could be reliably and consistently cited without permitting nuance or divergence.⁴⁶⁶ This need was especially true for monastic court cases, since competing interpretations of what was “lawful” in terms of both adhering to doctrine and the Vinayaṭaka could be resolved only if all parties had recourse to a singular Pali corpus that superseded individual opinion and transcended any local or contemporary tradition (*P. paramparā*). In this sense, the type of canon necessary to undergird the Buddhist Revival must be seen as existing beyond tradition, as untainted by the “broader histories and institutional settings of monastic law” in a given country or region (Schonthal 2018, 23). Such a canon was ideal and did not reflect the fuzzy reality of textual transmission, but its creation was merely a performance at the heart of the neoconservative Theravada project in Burma, which saw itself as alone in possessing an accurate and complete recension of *buddhavacana*, the Pali Tipiṭaka, to which it faithfully and literally adhered in both letter and spirit (Pranke 2008, 11). Janaka Ashin calls this neoconservative conceit a “fundamentalist” and “literalist” view of the canon that came to dominate amongst the monastic hierarchy in Burma, which itself took a “reactionary” stance to any perceived threat to the purity of the Tipiṭaka (Janaka Ashin 2016, 27). The key to performing the purity of the Tipiṭaka throughout the millennia were the *saṅgāyanas*, or councils, and for U Nu, it was his job as sovereign to stage his own pageant and host the Sixth Council in Yangon.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁶ The situation is not so different in the reforms and attempts to standardise language that swept throughout Asia before and after WWII. From the simplification of Chinese and Japanese characters, the Romanisation of Indonesian and Vietnamese, to the consistent spelling campaigns and dictionary projects in Burma, there was a convergent attempt by post-colonial, decolonizing and so-called modernising states to bring their national and local languages into standardised, stabilized, and rational forms that could be more easily managed by the state, used without ambivalence in litigation, and create country-wide curriculums and regimes of education.

⁴⁶⁷ U Nu was not an innovator in this regard, as “at the beginning of their reigns, the Konbaung kings generally ordered new copies of the Tipiṭaka on palm leaf and on *parabaik*” to be copied (Leider 2004, 98). For his part, King

The Sixth Council commenced on May 17th, 1954 and ended on May 24th, 1956, the year celebrated in Theravada Buddhist nations as being two and a half millennia since the Buddha attained *parinibbāna* and considered halfway through his *sāsana* according to orthodox commentarial accounts.⁴⁶⁸ An enormous expenditure for a country on the brink of civil war and financial collapse, the Sixth Council in effect took till the very end of U Nu’s time as prime minister, including its planning, preparing the texts for recitation, the actual recitation from 1954 to 1956, and the subsequent sessions to recite the commentaries and subcommentaries, lasting until 1962. The highlight of the Sixth Council—and of the Buddhist Revival as a whole—was a mass-recitation of the Pali Tipiṭaka over a two-year period involving thousands of monks and lay observers. Yet for our purposes in this chapter, it was the process leading up to the council and its long-term goals that are most revealing. As Chris Clark emphasizes, “the sixth Buddhist council may profitably be viewed as an editing project” (Clark 2015, 106), one that was meant to recover the ideal canon existing beyond tradition central to the neoconservative project. Starting in 1952, over “1300 editors” (Clark 2015, 106), including the Nyaungyan and the Mahasi, worked in regional teams preparing the final versions of Pali texts to be recited,⁴⁶⁹ using various

Bodawpaya “paid enormous attention not only to the copying of the Buddhist scriptures itself, but he also formed monastic commissions and committees with dozens of chief editors and auxiliary monks to revise the texts” (Leider 2004, 98), a process which culminated in the Fifth Council of the penultimate Konbaung king, Mindon.

⁴⁶⁸ Chris Clark explains that the closing ceremony of the council carefully planned so that it formally concluded [...] on the day of the year the Buddha is believed to have died, that is, the full moon day of the month of ဝေဒုန္တ (Vesākha, in Pāli)” (Clark 2015, 82).

⁴⁶⁹ In a series of Burmese newspaper article from 1954 offering his reasons for holding the council during such a difficult political and economic time for the country, U Nu explains that the editing work has been divided into 116 groups of “Pāli-visodhaka,” or “Pali purifiers,” which together amount to 1029 monks, meaning there was an average of 8 monks per group (Nu (၆) 1954a, 7). These groups were regionally divided, for example, a 12-member team from the city of Thaton, Mon State, were assigned the *Peṭakopadesa* to edit, perhaps significant because Thaton was home to one of the Mingun Jetavana most important meditation and monastic centres, and he was well-known as the author of the *Peṭ-a*.

printed recensions from South and Southeast Asia,⁴⁷⁰ commentaries and subcommentaries,⁴⁷¹ “Māgadha” grammars,⁴⁷² and finally, the opinions of learned sayadaws to decide amongst divergent readings and smooth out the texts to be recited as the council (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 125).

The reason why this massive undertaking was necessary is explained by members of the editorial team in the Pali introduction (P. *nidāna*) to the eventual Sixth Council edition of Pali texts, part of which is translated by Chris Clark below:

⁴⁷⁰ According to Michihiko Aono, the editors of the Sixth Council edition primarily relied on four sets of the Tipiṭaka in their work, the stelaes of the Fifth Council, the Royal Siamese edition, the Gunawardhana edition from Sri Lanka, and the Khmer-Pali Tipiṭaka from Cambodia (Aono 2022). Using a statistical analysis of variant readings from the opening passage of the *Kammakkhandhaka* section of the Vinaya (Vin II 1-7), Aono demonstrates that contrary to earlier assumptions, “the editors of the Sixth Council edition seem to have dealt with the Oriental editions equally without placing weight on the Kuthodaw Pagoda marble stelaes,” at least in this relatively small sample, and appear not to have referenced the Pali Text Society edition in this case either (Aono 2022).

⁴⁷¹ Though it is not made explicit in the Sixth Council editions which subcommentaries were used in the editing process, Htar Htar Aye notes that along with the Tipiṭaka, the official publishing house of the council printed a set of *īkās* (subcommentaries), including the *mūlaīkā* (root subcommentary), possibly referring to the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī-mūlaīkā* and the *Pañcapakaraṇa-mūlaīkā*, or to the *purāṇaīkās* (ancient subcommentaries) in general, the “*adutika[s]*,” which I take as a mis-transliteration for *anuīkās* (new subcommentaries), “*maratika[s]*,” which I am unclear about, and “*ganniyojananicha[s]*,” which appear to be a combination of a *gaṇṭhipada* (knotty words) type exegesis that explains difficult to understand or obscure words in the root text, and a *yojanā* type of exegesis, possibly in Burmese (Htar Htar Aye 2008, 131). For his part, U Nu mentions that as part of the editing process, the monks selected would compare and analyze variant readings against commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*), sub-commentaries (*īkā*), *anumadhu*, *yojanā*, *gaṇṭhi*, as well as various Pali grammars (*pālisaddā*), Sanskrit grammars (သင်္သကရိုက်သဒ္ဒါ *saṅsa ka rhik saddā*), and Pali and Sanskrit dictionaries (Nu (နု) 1954a, 7). Perhaps the texts mentioned by Htar Htar Aye were used during the editing process as well and themselves revised to match the new Sixth Council recension before their publication.

⁴⁷² The stipulation that the compilers use “Māgadha” grammars refers to the fact that there are both Pali, known also as Māgadha, and Sanskrit grammars that are available and pertinent to the editing process. While Pali grammatical systems owe a great deal to their Sanskrit counterparts, beginning with Pāṇini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, there appeared a new set of grammars starting with the *Kaccāyana* in the sixth to seventh centuries C.E., what Mahesh Deokar calls the “second phase” of Pali grammar “marked by the emergence of the indigenous Pali grammatical literature” (Deokar 2008, 2). Deokar goes on to explain that the development of indigenous Pali grammar “reached its peak in the second half of the 12th century A.D. with the compositions of the [*Moggallānavyākaraṇa*] of Mogg[allāna] and the [*Saddanīti*] of Agg[avaṃsa],” which spawned a proliferation of derivative texts in Southeast Asia in the second millennium (Deokar 2008, 3). A crucial point is that while such Pali grammars still “draw heavily” from the Sanskrit systems, “they try to depict Pali as a language independent of Sanskrit” (Deokar 2008, 4), which is part of the reason why the grammars are emphasized as “Māgadha” by Myat Myat Htun, even though Sanskrit grammars are known to have been used in the editing process as well.

After [such] a long time this word of the Buddha has been transmitted having been repeated many times through a succession of [hand] writing and a succession of printing. It is no longer possible to say, ‘It is completely pure simply because they held the first, second, third, etc. council[s].’ On the contrary, it is actually impure because of some wrong, inferior, and corrupted readings produced by careless writing, etc. found in recent books. For in this way, many dissimilar readings appear amongst books which are to be explained differently [yet] which run parallel with each other. (Clark 2015, 84–85) (square brackets in original)

In this statement, it is seen that the process of handing down the texts and the councils themselves are being blamed for introducing corruptions into the Tipiṭaka. Yet for the editors, beyond these corruptions there lies a flawless version of the Buddha’s words accessible through the right process, because, as the *nidāna* continues, “[t]he word of the blessed one—whose speech was unified [and] whose word was very pure—should be unified, very pure, [and] stainless” (Clark 2015, 87) (square brackets in original). In other words, because the Buddha’s teachings come from the mind of an enlightened individual, they are non-contradictory by definition, meaning any error or discrepancy was introduced through the transmission of these texts from generation to generation. The task of the Sixth Council editorial team is simply to identify such corruptions and excise them, which is precisely what they did. As Clark reports, the “choice of readings made by the editors of [the Sixth Council canon] has resulted in a text that is more homogeneous, adheres more closely to standard Pāli, and is more easily understood” (Clark 2015, 105). In this sense, the resultant recension is the opposite of a critical edition, for rather than following the principle of *lectio difficilior*, meaning that “the most difficult reading is considered most likely to be the earliest,” the editors exorcised such readings as being corruptions, flattening out multiple regional variations and textual vagrancies into a single authoritative set that left little room for misunderstanding or misinterpretation (Clark 2015, 106–7).

While this process of corruption identified by the editors of the Sixth Council edition includes manuscript witnesses, printing is especially signalled out as the cause of such decay. As Clark points out in his translation, the Pali word used for “printing” in the block quotation above is *muddaṇa*, which does not exist in any Pali-English dictionary except for Ūḥ Hoke Sein’s (ဦးဟုတ် စိန် Ūḥ hut cin) *Pāli-mran mā abhidhān* (ပါဠိ-မြန်မာအဘိဓာန် *Pāli-Burmese Dictionary*), suggesting it may be a neologism (Clark 2015, 84 ft. 13). In a Burmese newspaper article appearing in *The Light of Burma* from March 16th, 1954, U Nu offers his reasons for holding the Sixth Council amidst public backlash, taking aim at the profit-driven publishers (အမြတ်ကြီးစာပုံနှိပ်တိုက်ရှင် *amrat krīḥ cā puṃ nhip tuik rhañ*) who are not so much interested in preserving the teachings of the Buddha as turning a profit from selling the Tipiṭaka, resulting in hastily put together sets of texts that contain many errors and misprints, even from the same publishing house (Nu (န) 1954b, 6). The solution, aside from U Nu passing a Piṭaka Publishing Act in 1954 to make such careless profiteering illegal, was to produce a set of texts free from such errors. Hence the goal of the Sixth Council editorial project was not only to “purify [the] five *Nikayas* of [the] Buddha’s teachings,” but to “publish [this] purified *Tipitaka* and to [ensure it] exist[s] permanently by spreading these *Tipitaka* to various parts of the world” (Ei Ei Lwin 2011, 4).⁴⁷³ This intention was clearly stated in the Pali introductions to each volume as well, where it is said that “having obtained the purified [and] very pure original of the [Buddha’s] word, it will be printed and, because of the its influence spreading across different countries and

⁴⁷³ The actual printing was done on a press donated to the Buddha Sāsana Council by the Committee for a Free Asia (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 165). Later changing its name in 1954 to the Asia Foundation, Eugene Ford has shown how the Committee for a Free Asia was supported by covert funds from the CIA and involved itself in domestic Buddhist affairs in Burma and Southeast Asia as a means to counter communist influence in the region (Ford 2017). Altogether the Committee for a Free Asia contributed \$300,000 to the printing activities of the Sixth Council, using its donation “as an opportunity to gain a foothold in Burma” (Ford 2017, 38).

different regions throughout the whole world, the long term preservation of the Buddha’s *sāsana* will be accomplished” (Clark 2015, 87) (square brackets in original). Hence while the technology of print may have been a main driver of the degeneration of the Pali texts, it would also be used to safeguard its purity for posterity.

The publishing project extended well beyond the three baskets of the Tipiṭaka, including “a complete [set of] *Pāli* Commentaries and a complete [set of] *Pāli* Sub-Commentaries, each of 50 volumes, a 60[-]volume *Pāli*-Myanmar dictionary, [and] a life of the Buddha in 50 volumes” (Ei Ei Lwin 2011, 6). The “Pāli-Myanmar dictionary” mentioned by Ei Ei Lwin, which refers to the *Tipiṭaka pāli-mran mā abhidhān* (တိပိဋက ပါဠိ-မြန်မာအဘိဓာန် *The Tipiṭaka Pali-Burmese Dictionary*; introduced in Chapter One as the *Tipiṭaka abhidhān*), was envisioned from the very beginning of the Buddhist Revival project, for at a meeting in 1950 at the prime minister’s residence, U Nu “urged” then Minister of Religious Affairs, U Win, to undertake the dictionary as part of the broader publishing effort of the government (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 120). Indeed, this dictionary is perhaps the most ambitious of the above goals since it remains unfinished as of 2022 at 24 volumes, containing as it does every reference of a given word in the entirety of the Tipiṭaka. While the authoritative set of Pali texts was meant to act as the standard, definitive edition, the *Tipiṭaka abhidhān* plays an important role in how these Pali texts are understood, delimiting in theory the semantic range for every word found in the Tipiṭaka. The *Tipiṭaka abhidhān* is thus a powerful check on any centrifugal language forces that might develop their own meaning and interpretation of the standardized set of texts.

This check is especially pertinent to the writing of commentaries like the Mil-a because the consequences of formulating a definition in a commentary are not limited to an intertextual landscape, but can reverberate widely in a given society, as evidenced by the controversy over

the Mingun Jetavana’s commentary. In other words, “definitions can also be acts of social criticism” (Ganeri 2011, 67) and, we might add, acts of social innovation and reform, even in a text like the *Mil-a* written in a prestige language like Pali. Even if the definition is done in a language that most people cannot read—or perhaps because of this very fact—the act of definition can still have broad consequences, for

if a person within a specific culture has the power to determine the reference of the words of a shared language, then that person has the capacity to interpret and determine the contents of thoughts. In one respect he or she may then have the power to define the meaning of objects and actions, even the power to define others, for this capacity rests not only on a person’s ability to be semantically creative, but also on the same person’s social position to be so. (Kahrs 1998, 6)

The act of definition is thus not merely a scholastic exercise or an isolated linguistic event. Instead, it is enmeshed in a series of social power relations that not only reflect these relations but affects them in the process of assigning semantic referents to a given word or concept. Hence in publishing the *Tipiṭaka abhidhān*, the Burmese government and monastic hierarchy is attempting to commandeer the possibilities in the act of definition for themselves and foreclose on other’s ability to make meaning outside the conventional, orthodox sphere, regardless of that person’s social position or spiritual status. Indeed, this foreclosure was the stated goal of the editors of the dictionary, for as Levman points out, each volume contains a rosette on the front cover with the Pali words “*ciraṃ tiṭṭhatu sad-dhammo—sāsanika-ppamukha-ṭṭhāna-muddaṇa-yanta-ālayo*,” which Levman translates as: “May the true *dhamma* remain for a long time (here in this dictionary) as a receptacle for and means of sealing the foremost qualities of the teachings!” (Levman 2021a, 315). The word that is most striking in this sentence is *muddaṇa*, which Clark translated as “printing” above. I think “printing” works in the context of the *nidāna* for the Sixth Council edition of texts, since it is paired with “handwriting” (P. *lekha*), but in the rosette for the *Tipiṭaka abhidhān*, taking *muddaṇa* as “sealing,” as Levman does, better captures

the purpose of the lexicographical project. According to Monier-Williams, *mudraṇa*, the Sanskrit cognate of *muddaṇa*, means “the act of sealing up or closing or printing” (Monier-Williams [1899] 1960, 822), and this sense is exactly what the dictionary was meant to do: seal off the Pali canon. By accounting for the contents of the Tipiṭaka not just at the level of text, but at the word level, the *Tipiṭaka abhidhān* ensures that not even a new lexeme can be added, and thus no new concepts, doctrines, rituals, or practices. As Sheldon Pollock writes about this act of “language boundedness,” royal courts or even parliamentary governments like that of U Nu, “deploy grammars, dictionaries, and literary texts to discipline and purify but above all to define and exclude” (Pollock 2006, 416). Thus, only with the dictionary project as the final feat is the goal of the Sixth Council achieved, creating an immutable and irrefutable canon to settle any dispute that may arise amongst the *saṅgha* in Burma, now and in the future.

9.6 ‘Grammatical Rules Which Should Not be Done Wrongly’

This goal of sealing off the Pali canon is yet another reason why the Mil-a was controversial, at least according to a newspaper article in the November 26th, 1949-edition of the *Hanthawaddy*. Titled “The *Milinda[pañhā]-aṭṭhakathā*: The Decision to Exclude it from the *Sāsana*” (မိလိန္ဒ အဋ္ဌကထာ: သာသနာမှ အပပြုရန် ဆုံးဖြတ်ခြင်း: *Milinda-aṭṭhakathā: sāsanaṃ mha apa prū ran chumḥ phrat khrañḥ*), this article is a public pronouncement of the proceedings of a meeting by the Dhamma Teachers Organization (ဓမ္မာစရိယအဖွဲ့ *Dhammācariya aphvai*), which consisted of mostly lay scholars and high-ranking donors (Nāgavaṃsa 1949, 16). In fact, this organization included the then Chief Justice U Thein Maung (တရားဝန်ကြီးချုပ် ဦးသိမ်းမောင် Ta rāḥ van krīḥ khyup Ūḥ Simh mauṅ) (Nāgavaṃsa 1949, 16), a major player in the Buddhist Revival project. U Thein Maung was Vice President of the Buddha Sāsana Council, the body overseeing the

organizing efforts for the Sixth Council (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 170), and sat on the committee that selected the editorial teams for the Pali texts themselves (Myat Myat Htun 2006, 121).

According to the article, U Thein Maung and other notables “were not able to resolve in detail what they asked each on their own, and therefore, [the problem of the Mil-a] has to be resolved [by the Dhamma Teachers Organization publicizing this problem] through the association of newspaper journalists”⁴⁷⁴ (Nāgavaṃsa 1949, 16). What makes this public declaration unique, however, is that while his reforms to the *kaṭhina* robe-giving ceremony are mentioned, there is no word of the Mingun Jetavana’s efforts to revive the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. Instead, a further reason for the uproar over the Mil-a is proffered, namely, the fact that “the Pali writing is not even accurate” (ပါဠိ စီကုံး ခြင်း ပင်မမှန် *Pāḷi cī kuṃḥ khraṅḥ paṅ ma mḥan*) (Nāgavaṃsa 1949, 16). The article explains that

[i]n the aforementioned text, because of making mistakes in the problems of writing Pali according to the grammatical rules that should not be done wrongly, such as the accusative case, the nominative case, the singular number, plural number, etc, [...] the decision [to deem this text as not part of the Pali canon] was made.⁴⁷⁵ (Nāgavaṃsa 1949, 16)

Here is one point of contention not seen in the other newspaper articles critiquing the Mil-a, that the text contains many errors in Pali mechanics, mistakes in the “grammatical rules that should not be done wrongly,” especially in a text that claims to be an authoritative *aṭṭhakathā*. As a result, the Dhamma Teachers Organization has designated the Mil-a as not belonging to the *sāsana-vaṃsa* (သာသနာဝင် *sāsana vaṅ*), as outside the lineage of Pali texts that make up the

⁴⁷⁴ အသီးသီးတို့ လျှောက် မေးခြင်းကို အသေးစိတ် မဖြေ ရှင်းနိုင်သဖြင့်၊ သတင်းထောက် အသင်းမှတစ်ဆင့်ဖြေရှင်းရပါကြောင်း (Nāgavaṃsa 1949, 16)

⁴⁷⁵ အဆိုပါကျမ်းမှာ ကံ ကတ္တား ကေဂုဏ်၊ ဗဟုဂုဏ်စသော မမှားသင့် သော သဒ္ဒါစည်းမျဉ်းအရ ပါဠိရေး သားစီကုံး မှုများ မှားယွင်း လျက်၊ [...] ဆုံးဖြတ်ခဲ့ရပါကြောင်း (Nāgavaṃsa 1949, 16)

Tipiṭaka, commentaries, and subcommentaries. In other words, this organization deemed the Mingun Jetavana's commentary as heretical, as beyond the scope of orthodox Theravada Buddhism in Burma, in part because of its irregular Pali and inaccurate grammar.

A survey of the Mil-a shows that the Dhamma Teachers Organization is correct in terms of the Pali style of the Mingun Jetavana, as both Deshpande and Mizuno point out in their review of the text. According to Mizuno, “this book has many typing mistakes and misprints, and some [errors] cannot be said to be typing mistakes, for there are many different forms that are divergent from the usual word form” (Mizuno 2000, 27). Mizuno then provides a list of typing mistakes and variants at the end of his paper (Mizuno 2000, 28). Deshpande concurs, explaining that during the editing process, he “noticed that in many places, the Burmese spelling of the Pali words is inconsistent. We often do not find consonantal doubling where one would expect it (e.g. *puthujana/puthujjana*)” (Deshpande 1999, 19). He also adds that there appears to be confusion in terms of cerebrals, with a “lack of cerebrals where other traditions would read cerebrals (e.g. *pathavī/paṭhavī*), and presence of cerebrals where we would not expect them” (Deshpande 1999, 19). For my own part, there are many conspicuous errors in the text, such as when the Mingun Jetavana declines nouns according to the wrong gender, but perhaps most egregious is when the Mingun Jetavana seems to misquote or manipulate important formulas taken from the Vinaya. An example is the following sentence describing the withdrawal of the *kaṭhina* privileges during the rains retreat: *saṅgho kathinaṃ antarubbhārena uddhariyati* (Mil-a 172,⁵⁻⁶). The sentence should read something like: “the [privilege of receiving the] *kaṭhina* has been withdrawn (*uddhariyati*) by temporary suspension (*antarubbhārena*) by the *saṅgha*,” but since the verb *uddhariyati* is given in the passive, the sentence is grammatically awkward with *saṅgha* in the nominative; rather, *saṅgha* should be in the instrumental case as *saṅghena* to fit the syntax and

sense of the passive sentence. In other instances where a similar formula is seen in the Vinaya, the verb is given as active when *saṅgha* is in the nominative, such as “*saṅgho kaṭhinaṃ uddharati*” (Vin IV 87,²⁷⁻²⁸). This reading is the same in the Sixth Council edition and further confirmed by Buddhaghosa’s *Samanatapāsādikā* (Sp III 638,²¹⁻²²), which does contain as instance of *uddhariyati*, but without a corresponding *saṅgha* in either the nominative or instrumental case (Sp III 638,¹³⁻¹⁴). It may be possible to attribute this single mistake to a typing error, but the Mingun Jetavana maintains the passive *uddhariyati* and nominative *saṅgha* together twice more in the same paragraph (Mil-a 172,⁹; Mil-a 172,¹⁵⁻¹⁶), implying the sentence he has constructed as coming from the Vinaya. He also once erroneously supplies the plural form for the same verb when it should be singular (Mil-a 172,³²). These mistakes might seem slight, but since such proclamations on the removal of *kaṭhina* privileges essentially constitute Vinaya formulas, the precise wording is paramount.

On this point, Crosby emphasizes that “[i]f the Pali wording of a legal act was not enunciated or performed in a grammatically correct fashion, then doubts could be raised over its legitimacy. Perfect grammar was thus a legal necessity within the monastic institution” (Crosby 2013, 72). Gornall quotes Moggallāna from the *Moggallānapañcīkā*, a twelfth-century, reform-era grammatical text, as explaining that only those with perfect grammar “are able to complete this or that legal act (*kamma*) among the disciplinary acts, [...] having recited the legal formulae (*kammavācā*) in accordance with it (i.e. the discipline)” (Gornall 2020, 67). Given that the Mingun Jetavana had a traditional monastic education in some of the leading learning institutions in the Mandalay area, and since “[e]ven today Burmese monastic education is inconceivable without the study of Pāli grammar” (Ruiz-Falqués 2015, 3), this “mistake” by the Mingun Jetavana, or perhaps even worse, the deliberate change in the grammar of a legal formula to suit

his argument, was especially grave in the eyes of the monastic hierarchy and its affiliated lay supporters, like the Dhamma Teachers Organization.⁴⁷⁶

All this is to say that the grammar of the Mil-a is undisciplined, or perhaps we might better call it fluid. With a more porous concept of the canon in play, this fluidity might not be such a problem, especially because for classic commentators like Buddhaghosa, “grammar was only thought about insofar as it could help resolve linguistic problems in the interpretation of the canon and as such their grammatical analysis often reveals a willingness to bend the scope of the Sanskrit grammars they used to suit their exegetical needs” (Gornall 2020, 77). Yet under the Buddhist Revival program, inaccurate grammar had grave, society-wide ramifications.⁴⁷⁷ One of the reasons why this loose Pali grammar was problematic was because of another pillar of the

⁴⁷⁶ Even minor grammatical or simple spelling mistakes could be the subject of state sanction. Janaka Ashin discusses the case of the Mogok brought to the monastic court system that was resurrected after 1980, some 15 years after Ne Win repealed the Vinicchaya Thāna Act. Like the Mingun Jetavana, the Mogok was a highly educated teacher of *vipassanā* meditation who was thought to have reached the stage of *arahantship*. And like the Mingun Jetavana, this was not enough to protect him from state censure, even posthumously. Some 43 years after his passing, a monk who was part of the State Saṅghamahānāyaka Committee “examined every *dharmā* talk” delivered by the Mogok and discovered “278 occurrences of deviation from canonical norms” (Janaka Ashin 2016, 204). These deviations, of course, were only deviations only insofar as they did not match the standardized Sixth Council texts, the basis of such court cases. Unlike the Mingun Jetavana, the “deviations” that were discovered “mostly related to incorrect names, placenames and terminology,” not grammatical mistakes like those outlined above, though there were some “minor errors [...] in interpretation of the teachings of the Buddha” (Janaka Ashin 2016, 204–5). After rendering a judgement against the Mogok, the court ordered that the Mogok Meditation Centre “correct the errors in the books and tapes,” ensuring that any unrevised copies would not be circulated to the general public (Janaka Ashin 2016, 205).

⁴⁷⁷ This concern with proper grammar was not an innovation by U Nu, but the invocation of a long tradition in Southeast Asia. For example, writing about the role of grammar in the history of Pagan, Aleix Ruiz-Falqués explains that the reason why grammar was such an important part of the monastic curriculum is “because the protection of the religion goes hand in hand with the protection of Pāli grammar and literary scholarship” (Ruiz-Falqués 2015, 3). In the reform era of Sri Lanka (1157-1270 C.E.), Gornall confirms much the same sentiment, for Moggallāna, who is credited with having composed three landmark grammatical texts in the twelfth century, the *Moggallānavyākaraṇa*, *Moggallānavutti*, and the *Moggallānapañcikā*, “justif[ied] the study of the discipline in terms of the need to counter religious decline. There [in his new grammatical system] he argues that without grammar, scripture would completely disappear, followed by practice and then finally by insight” (Gornall 2020, 66). Indeed, “[d]uring the reform era, for instance, all the monks to hold the high office of ‘grandmaster’ were grammarians,” (Gornall 2020, 65), demonstrating the role of grammar in attempts to control and discipline the *saṅgha* as a whole.

Buddhist Revival, the centralization of the Pali exam system. The issue is highlighted in the *Hanthawaddy* article, decrying the dissonance between the undisciplined grammar of the Mil-a and the necessarily strict grammar of Pali exams:

The [Dhamma Teachers] organization, in making the urgent decision about this problem, [considered] two difficult major points of contention, as much as one can know (about) the[ir] confidential deliberation; in the first point, if the examiner, after referencing that document [i.e. the Mil-a], checks and gives a mark for the answer of the examinee, who takes other books as [their] reference, [the examiner] will consider [the answer] as wrong, even though it is right. This is one reason [not to accept the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* as part of the Pali canon], because it is not proper for the examinee.”⁴⁷⁸ (Nāgavaṃsa 1949, 16)

This is a remarkable statement, since the Mil-a has essentially been deemed heretical because it might result in an inaccurate result for a (likely) monastic student taking a state-sanctioned Pali exam. Given the political profile of the Dhamma Teachers Organization and its elite membership, this statement reflects the high stakes of such exams and the efforts to forge an exclusive, exact set of texts that can be used for the Buddhist Revival project, from court cases, missionary work, meditation teaching, to standardized Pali exams. What we see in the printing of the *Tipiṭaka abhidān* and the Pali exam system is what Gornall calls the “cultural work of grammar” (Gornall 2020, 82). When understood as operating as a cultural phenomenon, grammar is not merely a philological science relevant merely to specialists, but provides “an organizational plane on which the monastic community’s sacred canon and language could be established as an ordered and coherent object, bringing into being, as a result, an orderly

⁴⁷⁸ ဤအဖွဲ့က အရေး တကြီး ဆုံးဖြတ်ရာ၌ အတွင်းရေးသိရသမျှခက် ခဲသော အချက် ကြီး ၂ ချက် ရှိကြောင်း၊ ပဋ္ဌမအချက်မှာ အဖွဲ့ဝင် များစာချတန်းဖြေဆိုလျက်ရှိရာ၊ ပုဒ် ပါဠိ အက္ခရာ၊ သဒ္ဒါရေး အဆုံး အဖြတ်နှင့်စပ်သော မေးခွန်းပုစ္ဆာဝင် အဆိုပါကျမ်းကို အကိုးသာကေပြု၍၊ စစ်ဆေး အမှတ်ပေးပါက အမှားကိုအမှန် ဖေါက် ပြန် နှစ်နာစေ နိုင်သော အချက်တချက်ဖြစ်၍ (Nāgavaṃsa 1949, 16)

monastic community and in turn a favourable social and political climate” (Gornall 2020, 82). Hence the reason why the Dhamma Teachers Organization had to “make an urgent decision” about the Mil-a is because the Mingun Jetavana’s fluid grammar undermined the project of a stable, singular, and static set of Pali texts. For U Nu, the Nyaungyan, and U Thein Maung, this set of texts was the “organizational plane on which religious thought could be ordered,” and in turn, “served as the performative means by which monastic social hierarchies could be established and consolidated” (Gornall 2020, 214). The Mil-a, and the person of the Mingun Jetavana, disrupted this organizational plane, even while seeking to be a part of it himself when writing his much-maligned commentary.

9.7 Stone Slabs and Structural Diversity of the *Saṅgha*

At this point in the discussion, it is tempting to label the Mingun Jetavana as a radical, a dissenting voice who was aiming to disrupt the monastic hierarchy and challenge the Buddhist Revival project with his commentary. As Kawanami points out, there has been a tendency in scholarship to see the *arahant* in Burmese society as having the “potential for anti-structure as envisioned by Weber (1948) or Turner (1969)” (Kawanami 2009, 215). Within this framework, a monk like the Mingun Jetavana becomes “a creative and open force” who accumulates immense cultural currency and devotees, thereby destabilizing the entrenched power structures as a result (Kawanami 2009, 213–14). To be sure, the Mingun Jetavana had both a large number of powerful followers and immense cultural capital, which he leveraged to call for the revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* and to publish the first *aṭṭhakathā* commentary in at least 500 years. Yet the true import of his case is that the Mingun Jetavana did not set out to destabilize or disrupt the monastic hierarchy; rather, he saw himself as a part of the neoconservative fold, as firmly

embedded within the orthodoxy and orthopraxis of mainstream Theravada Buddhism, helping to establish the exclusive canon with his own commentary, a necessary component of any text to be included therein. By all accounts, the Mingun Jetavana wrote the Mil-a precisely because the root text placed at the end of the *Khuddakanikāya*, making its lack of *aṭṭhakathā* all the more glaring. In this sense, the Mingun Jetavana was attempting to further shore up the Pali “brick wall” mentioned in the first chapter, to use his own scholastic training and special insight wrought through meditation to guarantee that nothing could be added to the canon, nothing taken away after his commentary. He was thus not a radical, and probably did not see himself as a reformer either, but rather, the Mingun Jetavana and his followers took his work to be a major contribution to the Buddha’s *sāsana*, ensuring it would last until the 5000-year limit prescribed by the commentarial project the Mingun Jetavana inherited.

There is perhaps no better evidence of the conservative self-image that the Mingun Jetavana and his followers held than the final remarks by the Insein Mingun in his request to the U Nu administration to return the confiscated copies of the Mil-a. After suggesting that the administration convene a monastic trial involving the leading monks from Upper and Lower Burma, the Insein Mingun asks that “if [these convening monks] decide that the text is correct [in its interpretations, the Mingun Jetavana] wishes that the [U Nu] administration apologize for confiscating this text, because having done so was like removing a scripture from inside the *sāsana*”⁴⁷⁹ (Bha rī Ukkaṭṭha 1949, 15). It is not surprising that unlike the Dhamma Teachers Organization, the Insein Mingun, the Mingun Jetavana, and their followers take the Mil-a to be a

⁴⁷⁹ မှန်သည်ဟု ဆုံးဖြတ်တော်မူကြပါက ယခုကျမ်းကြီးကို သာသနာဝင် ကျမ်းစာတစောင်အဖြစ်မှ ပယ်ထားသည်ကို နှုတ်သိမ်းပေးရန်အတွက် အစိုးရက တောင်းပန်ပေးစေလို ပါသည် (Bha rī Ukkaṭṭha 1949, 15)

proper “scripture” (ကျမ်းစာ *kyamḥ cā*), a composition firmly embedded “within the *sāsana*” (သာသနာဝင် *sāsana van*) where it performs its critical role as a commentary on a canonical root text. What is surprising, however, is the reason the Insein Mingun gives for why this text is canonical, which he explains in the final sentence of his public plea to the U Nu administration in the *Hanthawaddy*:

The reason why [it is like removing a scripture from the *sāsana*] is because, just as the hermit U Khanti had the great commentary written by the Original Mingun [Jetavana] Sayadaw, the *Peṭakopadesa-aṭṭhakathā*, inscribed on stone [and placed in the Candāmuni cetī] in Mandalay, the great commentary, the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā*, is at present also being prepared for inscription on stone.⁴⁸⁰ (Bha rī Ukkatṭha 1949, 15)

As seen in Chapter Five, the Peṭ-a, the Mingun Jetavana’s first Pali commentary from 1926, was inscribed on stelae and placed alongside the rest of the *aṭṭhakathā* and *ṭīkā* literature in the *Candāmuni cetī* (စန္ဒာမုနိစေတီ, introduced in Chapter Five as the Sandamuni Pagoda).⁴⁸¹ Right across from the *Ku tuil tau bhu rāḥ* (ကုသိုလ်တော်ဘုရား, a.k.a., the Kuthodaw Pagoda), the site of the Fifth Council set of texts King Mindon had inscribed on stone, the fact that the Mingun Jetavana’s text was installed in the Sandamuni Pagoda bestows enormous prestige and honour on

⁴⁸⁰ အကြောင်းဆိုသော် ဤ အဋ္ဌကထာကျမ်းကြီးကို ရေးသားတော်မူသော မူလမင်းကွန်းဆရာတော်ကြီးသည်ပင်လျှင် ရေးသားတော်မူသော ပေဋကောပဒေသ အဋ္ဌကထာကျမ်းကြီးကို ရသေ့ကြီးဦးခန္တိက မန္တလေး၌ ကျောက်ထက်အက္ခရာတင်ထားသလို ယခု မိလိန္ဒပညာ အဋ္ဌကထာကျမ်းကြီးကိုလည်း ကျောက်ထက်အက္ခရာတင်ရန် အသင့်ပြင်ဆင်ပြီးသားဖြစ်ပါသည်။

⁴⁸¹ For more on U Khanti and the stelae at the Sandāmuni Pagoda, see Yee Yee Win (2011) and Bollée (1968, 498).

his first *aṭṭhakathā*. The implication by the Insein Mingun is that the same honour naturally befalls the Mil-a, which was eventually inscribed on approximately 30 stelae and still stands at the same Mingun Monastic Complex in Yangon built by U Nu in 1950 (see figure 8). When Bollée was in Burma in the late 1960s, he visited this site, explaining that the text was “partly engraved on marble slabs



Figure 8 Stelae of the *Milindapañhā-aṭṭhakathā* in the Mingun Monastic Complex in Yangon. They are currently housed in a specially constructed building erected in 1975. It appears that this is not the complete text. (Photo by the author)

which are lying [...] in the compound of the Mingun monastery (in Lewis Road, Rangoon), in the open air, covered with weeds” (Bollée 1969, 318). According to the current leading sayadaw of the Mingun Monastic Complex, the inscription work was partially carried out in Mandalay, a centre for such work, then finished in Yangon. From Bollée’s description and my own inspection of the site, it does not appear that the entire text was inscribed, and possibly because of the controversy that erupted over the commentary and the *de facto* ban on its publication until the early 2010s,⁴⁸² the stelae were left in a state of neglect until 1975, when a new building was

⁴⁸² While this ban was never made official nor officially lifted as far as I understand, the Bhamo Sayadaw (ဗန်းမော် ဆရာတော် *Banḥ mau cha rā tau*), the leading figure on the State Saṅghamahānāyaka Committee, declared in the mid-2010s that the printing of this text was now permitted, leading to a new edition published by Pali scholar U Aung Mon (ဦးအောင်မွန် *Ūḥ Aon mvan* a.k.a. မြတ်ဆုမွန် *Mrat chu mvan*) and a group of donors in 2016. According

constructed to house them. Unlike the Peṭ-a stelae, which are freely accessible to anyone who visits the Sandamuni Pagoda, access to the Mil-a is restricted, perhaps to protect them from vandalism or destruction given their controversial status (see figure 9).

In the eyes of Huxley, the inscription of the Mil-a on marble slabs was an act of “retaliation” by the Mingun Jetavana’s followers against the U Nu administration (Huxley 2001, 134), yet given the timeline of events offered by the Insein Mingun in the article from the *Hanthawaddy*, the inscription project was already underway before the confiscation occurred, indicating that the Mingun Jetavana’s followers were not motivated by spite. Instead, to his followers, the Mingun Jetavana’s Mil-a naturally belonged on stone, a medium that reflected the text’s stature in their mind and

would ensure its rightful place in the Buddha’s *sāsana* for posterity. As Emmrich observes about the Fifth Council stone slabs, “print comes to share the status of source medium with manuscript during Mindon’s reign vis-à-vis the epigraphical target medium: Stone is meant to achieve what both palm leaf and paper cannot” (Emmrich 2021, 14). Here, the purpose of stone is to



Figure 9 While Bollée indicated that in the late 1960s, these stelae were left out in the open “covered with weeds,” they are now locked away and cannot be accessed except by permission from the abbot of the Mingun Monastic Complex. (Photograph also by author)

to the publication information, this edition is considered the second, and is essentially a reprint of photocopies of the 1949 edition with an introduction by U Aung Mon (2016).

strive for a certain transcendence, both in terms of resisting the decay that paper and palm leaf undergo, but also to surpass the mundane status of a quotidian scholarly text. The Mingun Jetavana's commentary, then, is more than just a contemporary work of erudition, for it is to his followers and the Insein Mingun a scripture as much as any other classic commentary, rounding out the membrane of the Tipiṭaka and defining what belongs and what does not. In this way, Huxley is partly right, since he views the project to inscribe the Mil-a on stone as a "magnificent gesture of contempt toward the technology of printing" (Huxley 2001, 134). The message of the medium here is that this text belongs firmly within the *sāsana*, as resolutely as the marble slabs on which it is inscribed.⁴⁸³ While the U Nu administration was seeking to publish an authoritative set of Pali texts as part of its Sixth Council edition and circulate them all over Burma and the world, the Mingun Jetavana's followers went in a different direction, inscribing his text on a medium that would last as long as the *sāsana* itself but which would be limited to a single, obscure location.

If it can be said that the Mingun Jetavana's donors were not acting in defiance of the state, their support for the Mil-a in contrast to its later government seizure and public censure does demonstrate a crucial fact about the *saṅgha* at the onset of the Buddhist Revival project, namely, that it had not so much degenerated from an earlier integrity, but in the words of Kirichenko, had reached a dynamic state of "structural richness" (Kirichenko 2018, 147). This structural richness, or what we might call as internal, assertive heterogeneity reflective of a

⁴⁸³ Myint Myint Oo and Nyein Chan Maung describe in their dissertation a series of other projects in Burma to inscribe texts onto stone (Myint Myint Oo 2011a, 85–87; Nyein Chan Maung 2006, 29). Most of these projects include either texts from the Tipiṭaka, commentaries, or subcommentaries, but the works of the Ledi Sayadaw, mostly consisting of Burmese *dīpanīs* ("handbooks" or "manuals") are also carved on stone in Monywa, Sagaing Region, as detailed by Pa Pa Aung (2012).

structural diversity, began at the end of the Konbaung period and steadily increased during the colonial period, as “running the *sangha* top-down” no longer (or perhaps never was) possible given the increasing complexity of society itself (Kirichenko 2018, 147). This complexity “reflect[ed] a greater variety of Buddhist agendas,” both among monks and the lay public, and as evidenced by the case of the Mil-a, demonstrated the “pluralization of patronage opportunities” (Kirichenko 2018, 155). Monks like the Mingun Jetavana reflect this expansion of the possibilities of patronage, as the “New Laity,” in Jordt’s terminology (2007), increasingly asserted themselves in the political economy of Buddhism as the urban middle class grew in numbers, political power, and proximity to the centre of the *sāsana*. As this new laity became more socially complex, sought out new educational and occupational opportunities, espoused diverse world views, and formed cosmopolitan networks outside Burma, so too did their means of supporting and influencing Buddhist monasteries and monks multiply (Kirichenko 2018, 155). As a result, one faction of lay people, like the Dhamma Teachers Organization, loudly voiced their concerns over the Mil-a and allied with monks like the Nyaungyan, while another faction, like those belonging to the Paṭipatti Sāsana Nuggaha Association, threw their support behind the Insein Mingun. Such is the two-pronged question that faced the U Nu administration throughout the Parliamentary period: how to supplicate both sides without alienating one or the other. As should be apparent by now, this dilemma was intractable, which is why to many observers, his administration was ultimately toppled by the Buddha Revival project he initiated. For example, Tin Maung Maung Than cites the Buddhist Revival, and the efforts to make Buddhism as the state religion in particular, as the “raison d’être for the intervention of the military in March 1962” (Tin Maung Maung Than 1988, 27). According to him, U Nu’s attempt to make Buddhism the state religion while also placating the fears of non-Buddhist communities in the Union of

Burma weakened the already “fragile political fabric” of a fledgling nation state (Tin Maung Maung Than 1988, 27). In a twist of epic irony, then, U Nu’s desire to create a Buddhist unity around which the citizens could rally wound up doing the opposite, at least in the immediate political reality of the parliamentary period, demonstrating the nature of the dilemma that faced the independent administration in dealing with the Mingun Jetavana and his commentary. In this case, U Nu was both patronizing the Mingun Jetavana’s meditation lineage in the form of the Mahasi Thathana Yeiktha, while simultaneously trying to quell the uproar over his Mil-a, an almost impossible task to balance.

Conclusion

After this review of the reception of the Mil-a in newspapers from late 1949 to early 1950, a reception history set against the historical conjunctures of mid-twentieth-century, independent Burma, it becomes clear that the goal of U Nu to both control the *saṅgha* and promote a shared Buddhist unity through *vipassanā* meditation was an almost impossible endeavor, what literary theorist Paik Nak-Chung terms the “double project of modernity” (Nak-Chung 68). This double project involves both “simultaneously adapting to and overcoming modernity” (Nak-Chung 68). For U Nu, this meant repurposing the charisma afforded by Konbaung-era models of Buddhist kingship to secure electoral success, ensure his legitimacy in the eyes of the population, and oversee a sprawling bureaucratic system aimed at controlling not just citizens, but the *saṅgha*, thereby stretching the concept of the “citizen” in the modern nation state. It also meant utilizing the modern, reform method of *vipassanā* and its network of meditation centres to morally discipline the population, including lay people, *thilashins*, and monks, so that they could properly participate in democratic politics on a massive scale. His task was to create an

enlightened citizenry committed to the cause of forging a national unity built on premodern Buddhist principles adapted to the exigencies of the newly independent nation. At the same time, U Nu had to contend with and overcome a fractured nation, where ethnic divisions were exacerbated by colonial policies of divide and rule, where industry and individual lives were devastated by World War II, a territory almost torn asunder by the geopolitics of the Cold War then emerging, and an economy on the brink of collapse after sixty years of imperial plunder. Such is the double project of modernity that faced U Nu, a project which his commitments to Buddhism as a ruling logic and political ideology doomed from the start.

What I have shown, starting in Chapter One and especially in this current chapter, is that central to both the ideology and ruling logic of the U Nu administration was the concept of the exclusive canon. This operative concept can be traced back to at least the beginning of the nineteenth century in Burma, was reinforced by the Fifth Council of King Mindon, and reached a crescendo in the Sixth Council inaugurated in May of 1954 by the U Nu administration. This project aimed to create an exclusive canon *de jure*, a solidified and immutable set of authoritative texts which could be used by bureaucratic bodies and their monastic courts to pass and adjudicate laws meant to control the way the *saṅgha* thought and behaved. What this chapter has shown is that such a project is in vain without also controlling commentaries, for it is through commentaries that the meaning of this exclusive canon *de jure* is harnessed, mitigated, and manipulated. While the Mingun Jetavana did not set out to challenge the concept of the exclusive canon, and in fact probably understood his commentary to be a key part in this effort, the case of the Mil-a demonstrates that commentaries both shore up an exclusive canon but can also lead to its unravelling. In the same way, the neoconservative interpretation of Theravada Buddhism that dominates in Burma, at least among the monastic elite and its patrons in the state and in civil

society, is coextensive and reliant on the concept of the exclusive canon *de jure*. The problem, however, is that unlike an exclusive canon, admittedly an artificial but still efficacious concept, a static set of commentaries can never be finalized. For commentaries by their very nature invite further explanation, continued debate and apologetics, and more and more innovation and reform, even if only in small increments which prove over time to be seismic to a given tradition (Braun 2013, 60). This is especially true in the case of what we may call the “modern” commentary of the Mingun Jetavana, one that stands atop and appropriates the whole history of the *sāsana* in its vision of the *vimutti khet*. What exactly I mean by calling the Mil-a a “modern” commentary, how it reveals the critical role of commentary in the functioning of the exclusive canon *de jure*, and how it unleashes the recursive power of commentary in Burmese Theravada, will be taken up in the conclusion to follow.

Conclusion: Unleashing the Recursive Power of Commentary

The Mil-a is a recalcitrant text. Just like the text it comments upon, it resists definitive conclusions. As we have seen, it does not convey one central message, it does not represent a unified system, and it does not provide closure on any doctrinal issue. The main reason for this defiance is that the Mil-a embodies a lifetime of scriptural scholarship and meditation practice by its author, the Mingun Jetavana, a founding figure in the modern reform movement of *vipassanā* and a “forgotten *tipiṭakadhara*,” in the words of Htay Hlaing. Yet this text is also the product of an almost forgotten and largely unknown ethos wherein questions of enlightenment, supernormal powers, Pali and vernacular exegesis, and *sāsana* history collide with and complement one another in the first half of twentieth-century Burma. The value in studying a text like the Mil-a, even a study that might only be provisional, is that it brings together emerging trends in multiple fields that are beginning to appreciate Theravada Buddhism as a literary, social, *and* political force, not in compartmental terms as discrete units of action, but in a multidimensional way that emphasizes the influences these three spheres of human activity have on and through one another. By linking Pali literature, meditation theory, soteriological innovations, gender dynamics, and Buddhist biopolitics, this study reveals the limits of our conceptual categories and academic assumptions about the nature of religion and secularism in Southeast Asia in mid-twentieth century, using Burma as a bounded but instructive case study that can be extrapolated to other nations and religions in the region.

What began as a fairly straightforward study on a single commentary written by a solitary individual on a particular text exploded into a mass of disparate monastic scholars, quasi-legendary figures from the Tipiṭaka, an authoritative lineage of Pali commentators, writers of

monastic biographies, newspaper publishers, and political actors before and after independence in Burma, all working within and beyond the centre of the *sāsana*. This study revolved around an intertextual nexus of supposedly unimpeachable scriptures, authoritative but incomplete *aṭṭhakathās*, vernacular biographies-cum-histories, anecdotal accounts of the performance of the *abhiññās*, controversies playing out in print and public, society-wide discourses on *sāsana* decline, and government attempts to standardize an exclusive Pali canon. This web of figures, texts, projects, and prerogatives were analyzed against a backdrop of a meditation movement then transforming society, multiple layers of commentarial strategy and logic, knowledge of past lives and the future, debates about *bhikkhunī upasampadā* and the state of the *sāsana*, and the Buddhist revival program of the first independence government. In bringing these disparate and at times contradictory threads together and using the Mil-a as a point to pivot all these sources and issues upon, we are able to draw out the social and political implications of Pali commentary, implications that have always been a part of the project from its inception, but which were often purposefully elided by the commentators of those curating their legacies in an effort to make the texts appear apolitical and thus authoritative, thereby serving these very same political ends in the process. By way of a general conclusion to this work, I will discuss the ramifications of foregrounding the political motives, impact, and function of Pali commentary, starting with the question of whether the Mil-a is a modern commentary, and if so, in what ways?

A Modern Commentary?

The question, put another way, is how does the Mil-a relate to the premodern commentaries composed by his predecessors, like Buddhaghosa and Dhammapāla active at the base of the Pali commentarial project, and how does his work differ? What, in other words, is unique about the

Mingun Jetavana’s commentary that marks it as “modern,” if at all, and what does this tell us about the Mingun Jetavana’s larger project of *vipassanā* meditation? These questions are not so much concerned with periodization, because even though those curating the legacy of the Mingun Jetavana present him as the first person to have composed an *aṭṭhakathā* in at least five centuries, if not a millennium, and possibly the first person in Southeast Asia to accomplish this feat, this claim is partly a matter of semantics. The nominal nature of such an historical declaration, whether true or not, is highlighted by the fact that the use of the genre title “*aṭṭhakathā*” by the Mingun Jetavana was fiercely contested and far from universally recognized. Indeed, when the Burmese monk Bhaddanta Kumārābhivaṃsa published a *de facto* *aṭṭhakathā* to the *Therī-apadāna* in 1992, a less provocative title of “*Therī-apadāna-dīpanī*” was chosen by the State Sangha Mahanāyaka Council, even though it is declared triumphantly in the introduction of this text that “with this work, the commentaries of all the fifteen texts of the Khuddaka-nikāya are now complete” (Obhāsabhivaṃsa [1992] 2009, xvi).⁴⁸⁴ Using “*dīpanī*” instead of “*aṭṭhakathā*” is more redolent of the titles the Ledi gave to his works in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, titles which hazard much less of a presumptive position vis-à-vis the Pali textual tradition. But semantics matters, and if we follow the Mingun Jetavana’s lead and accept his commentary as an *aṭṭhakathā*, rather than a *ṭīkā*, or even a *navatīkā* or *abhinavatīkā*, which would explicitly signal the “newness” or “very newness” of his text, then perhaps it is fair to say that the Mil-a is in fact premodern in character and quality.

In many ways, the Mil-a does follow the model of a premodern, or medieval commentary, since the Mingun Jetavana generally adheres to the order of the “whole text [of the

⁴⁸⁴ I must thank Chris Clark for bringing this text to my attention and sharing with me its introduction.

Mil, proceeding] line by line, presenting a new reading while serving the integrity of the text” (Gibbs 2000, 10). As we saw in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, he is mostly faithful to the *pada* strategy of commentary, where each word or phrase is “picked up” in roughly the order they appear in the text and defined line by line according to an orthodox understanding of the word or phrase in question. Likewise, the Mingun Jetavana does not set out to question the integrity of the root text, quite the opposite, for part of his role as a commentator as he sees it is to provide a *sambandha* (“connection”) between the Mil and the rest of the Pali corpus, taking pains to trace the pedigree of the Mil to the Fourth Council and warning his readers, as we saw in Chapter One, that if a word “agrees with the word[s] that have come down in the *sutta*, you all should certainly not second-guess [by saying]: ‘is this one [letter or word] proper, is this not one proper?’ It should be taken just as it has been received.”⁴⁸⁵ One of the primary insights of Chapter Two and Chapter Three, in fact, was that the Mingun Jetavana innovates according to the conventional strategies of the Pali commentarial project, not in spite of them. Even the deep logic of commentary discussed in Chapter Four comes from the *Peṭ* and the *Nett*, two texts firmly entrenched in a premodern approach to the act of exegesis. Lastly, it is true that the Mingun Jetavana relies uncritically on Buddhaghosa in his *aṭṭhakathā*, providing not creatively curated quotes or detailed analyses interwoven with his own ideas, but pages upon pages taken from the *Vism* verbatim, apparently sacrificing some of his own autonomy in the process.

Here lies, however, the key question, that of autonomy. Gibbs identifies two primary hallmarks of modern commentary, an autonomy of thought and vision beyond that found in the

⁴⁸⁵ *sutte āgatapadena saṃsanditvā ekaccaṃ yuttaṃ ekaccaṃ na yuttaṃ ti ekamsato no vicāretha yathālābho gahetabbo* (Mil-a 12¹¹⁻¹³)

root text, and the presence of the author's own voice amidst the different authorities invoked by the commentator in the course of their exegesis (Gibbs 2000, 10). Although it does not constitute the majority of the commentary, I have tried to demonstrate that such an autonomous voice does indeed exist in the Mil-a, such as when the Mingun redirects the root text into extended discussions of meditation theory as outlined in Chapter Four, or when he argues to reinstate the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, the focus of Chapter Eight. This second example is most telling, because by invoking the *abhiññās*, particularly the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa* ("knowledge of the future"), as a means to understand the Buddha's plan for the present, the Mingun Jetavana is essentially "assembling a system or an essay in his own voice" (Gibbs 2000, 10). Part of the system he is assembling involves the emancipatory potential of *vipassanā* meditation for women, which demonstrates how the Mingun Jetavana reinterprets the Mil and other Pali texts on which he comments in his own unique voice and according to his own vision of *sāsana* history. What both of these forms of autonomy in the Mil-a have in common, the call for *bhikkhunī-upasampadā* and the extended discussions of *vipassanā*, is that they rely on the techniques and sources of the premodern to develop this new system, one in which the *abhiññās*, *sāsana* history, and the role of women in that history are all interconnected. When analyzed in this way, the Mingun Jetavana fits the mold of his predecessor, the Ledi, who offers a "vision of modernity in Buddhist terms" (Braun 2013, 146). For both the Ledi and the Mingun Jetavana, this Buddhist vision of modernity is based on premodern techniques of commentary, Burmese models of monastic education from the end of the nineteenth century, and the deployment of *vipassanā* meditation as a vehicle for reform and mass-lay mobilization. But the most insightful point offered by Braun for this present work concerns his observation that the career of the Ledi can be best understood as a form of "improvisation," a sort of hybridization where the "traditional view was an integral

part of his vision of modernity” (Braun 2013, 155). In this sense, it can be said that the Mingun Jetavana “unleashes the premodern by producing tradition” (Emmrich 2018, 92), that is, he is using the *abhiññās* and his own special insight purportedly wrought through *vipassanā* practice to collapse the temporal gulf between himself and the Buddha, reviving the intention of the Buddha as an operative force in present debates about the role of women in the decline or prolongation of the *sāsana*. While Buddhaghosa or Dhammapāla frequently deploy the intention of the Buddha as a device to elucidate the historical conditions under which a particular discourse or teaching was first given in the distant past, the Mingun Jetavana reanimates this intention as still effervescent and efficacious, as an active historical force that continues to shape the *sāsana* and determines the way a teaching or monastic rule is to be enacted and applied today. It is precisely this premodern intention that the Mingun unleashes, and this intention which fuels and supports the author’s autonomy in the Mil-a.

The reason why such autonomy as seen in the Mil-a is a hallmark of modernity is because it represents what Anne Hansen calls, following David Harvey (1990), a “self-consciousness of temporality” (Hansen 2007, 11). This concept is insightful because it allows us to understand that while the Mingun Jetavana was using premodern commentarial practices, he was also creating a simulacrum of the *aṭṭhakathā* genre in a way that collapsed the gulf of centuries or millennia of change and diversification in the Pali tradition, which is what we saw in Chapter Seven. Writing an *aṭṭhakathā* commentary in Pali motivated by the epistemology of the *abhiññās* is thus not a return to origins, but a profoundly modern conceit of its own where one commandeers for themselves a perspectival-less and ceaseless horizon of possibility meant to erase the variables of history, a kind of omniscience over the Tipiṭaka and the destiny of the *sāsana* itself. In this way, the Mingun Jetavana is making a claim for the radical transcendence of his own life and time,

which is not so much a period of *sāsana* decline according to him, but a focal point where, like the five great rivers of the South Asian subcontinent leading into the ocean, the *sāsana* flows into and empties itself. This historical climax is exactly what is signalled by the concept of the *vimutti khet* and the “dawning of the age of *vipassanā*” discussed in Chapter Six as referenced in the Mingun Jetavana’s biography. What we therefore see in the Mingun Jetavana’s *Mil-a* when he insists that the *abhiññās* are still possible and that they connect the Buddha’s omniscience and the Mingun Jetavana’s exegesis, is the belief that he stands at this zenith and culmination of *sāsana* history, at the dawn of the *vimutti khet* which he played such an instrumental part in christening. In this universalist position, which demonstrates his self-consciousness and command over the premodern, he is capable of surveying an almost cosmological panorama where every possible vantage point is laid out before him. This endless vista is nothing but the divine eye at the basis of the *anāgataṃsa-ñāṇa*, where the premodern bursts into the present. Perhaps more appropriately, this vista is the *samanta-cakkhu* operative in the present, where the Buddha’s omniscience is not relegated to the past, but an active force in shaping the future of the *sāsana*. Hence to claim that the Buddha knew the future is not controversial; to claim that you know and can articulate the future the Buddha foresaw, that is where the controversy erupts. It is precisely this unobstructed vantage point that the Mingun Jetavana assumes for himself when writing his commentary, when he channels the intention and omniscience of the Buddha in his text, and when he commandeers the power of this reanimated omniscience to call for the higher ordination of women in the twentieth century. In a word, the Mingun Jetavana *becomes* the very future he claims the Buddha had envisioned.

The same kind of self-consciousness of temporality, such that one stands outside of time, motivates the ontology behind the reform movement of *vipassanā* in Burma. What is remarkable

about this particular movement is that all the complexities and contradictions of “Theravada Buddhism” are flattened into a single text (the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* or perhaps the *Vism*) and reduced to the act of noting one’s bodily posture or following the inhalation and exhalation of the breath. The use of the commentarial logic of the *Peṭ* and the *Nett* in the *Mil-a* is not unprecedented, but his distillation of the essence of the *dhamma* into the categories and goals of *vipassanā* marks a modern conceit and a force of vision where the Mingun Jetavana is asserting his own authority to decide what counts as proper *dhamma* and what does not. In this process, all other spheres of religious activity that together constitute Theravada Buddhism, be they scriptural study, performing ritual, carrying out social work, conducting ceremonies, participating in local economies, educating children, engaging in magic, providing entertainment, administering medicine to the sick, rebelling against or supporting the state, are subsumed by, made subject to, or outright erased under the rubric of *vipassanā*. The result is that these interwoven and inseparable categories are disassociated, ostracized from what counts as “pure *sāsana*.” Hence writing an *aṭṭhakathā* commentary in Pali and claiming to know the intention of the Buddha is precisely what we would expect not from a monk orientated towards the sphere of *pariyatti*, someone like the Nyaungyan, but a monk committed to the sphere of *paṭipatti* and the clarity of message and singularity of purpose that goes along with it. Such is what it means to call the *Mil-a* a “modern commentary,” not that it is expressly original in its methodology or is the first *aṭṭhakathā* in perhaps a millennium, but because it embraces and utilizes an all-encompassing view of *sāsana* history over which it alone has the purview to define, demarcate, and defend.

Politics by Another Means

In recognizing this modern conceit in the Mil-a, we can begin to unravel the ways this perspectival-less vantage point operative in the life and writings of someone like the Mingun Jetavana leads to the ultimately false separation between the “religious” and the “secular” in early twentieth-century Burma. If one assumes the power to extract themselves from the vagaries of history and locates themselves atop a cosmological, transcendent history of the *sāsana*, then one’s actions become sublimated and insulated from other “impure” spheres of human activity. Yet by examining the Mingun Jetavana’s Mil-a alongside his modern, reform movement of *vipassanā* and against U Nu’s Buddhist Revival program, such acts of sublimation and insulation are shown to also involve social and political strategies of survival and organization. Hence a second insight of this dissertation is the realization that “[i]n the Theravada Buddhist world, religion is necessarily at once political and religious” (Schober 2011, 77). In this instance, we can be more specific and state that writing religious commentary is always a political act. This statement is not meant to reduce the composition of commentary to a single sphere of human action, since writing exegesis involves a rich set of motivations and goals, some of which are local, even individual in nature, and some of which leave a more resounding legacy than others. Rather, my point is that commentary does not exist in a vacuum but is an integral part of a larger network involving monastic court systems, the regulation of monastic participation in the economy, the setting of boundaries on women’s participation in society, evaluating the validity of ordination lineages, assessing the accuracy of a state-sanctioned canon, and trying to build a nation using Buddhist rhetoric, tropes, and principles. Without the input of commentary, this network lacks legitimacy and fails to function. The case of the Mil-a thus demonstrates that commentary need not be explicitly political to have far-reaching ramifications in the state’s

attitude and approach towards Buddhist institutions and monastic actors. In other words, exegesis, even in a prestige language unknown to most of the population—or precisely because of this prestige and inaccessibility—can reinforce and disrupt ruling ideologies, intervene and shape metanarratives of shared histories and destinies, and define or redirect quests for national unity with Buddhism at the centre.

On this point, Jordt argues that “it is in the ubiquitous realm of Buddhism—precisely the place in which political commentary is least expected—where we must look to discern political action” (Jordt 2007, 147). While she is referring to the mass lay meditation movement emerging from modern reform *vipassanā*, we have seen throughout this work that the Mil-a cannot be neatly separated from this movement, both in terms of the text’s author and its content, reinforcing a critical fact about religious exegesis: while it may claim for itself a sequestered doctrinal or literary space apart from social and political machinations, it always comments on and shapes secular activity. Indeed, it is precisely because of its ability to appear as existing beyond the political that imbues it with the most political force. This force includes regulating the political economy of lay-monastic relations, controlling who has the power to create and circulate new definitions, circumscribing the social capital of charismatic monks, mitigating the soteriological potential of women in an age, mediating the interplay of prestige and vernacular languages, and controlling monastic bodies. This last point is especially relevant for our discussion because the dilemma the U Nu administration faced with the Mil-a came down to control over the *saṅgha* in post-colonial Burma, to the surveillance of and ability to direct individual monastic bodies and behavior, and thereby, to surveil and direct the bodies and behavior of lay people who follow these monastics.

But how does a parliamentary, bureaucratized government beset by civil war and economic precarity control the *saṅgha*? The *saṅgha* in its totality, taken together with its lay supporters and textual communities, is an abstract, diffuse, and intangible construct, an “imagined community” not dissimilar to the concept of the Andersonian nation but “imagined instead in moral, soteriological, and supernatural terms” (Turner 2014, 144). In the abstract, it was this imagined community that U Nu was targeting with his notion of Buddhist unity, an ideological approach to bringing order to a loose collection of monastic and lay citizens. In more pragmatic terms, however, control of the *saṅgha* as a population meant for U Nu the corporeal control of the bodies of monks as aggregated individuals. Controlling the bodies of monks was a perennial but nearly impossible goal of generations of monarchs, regional “tax-eaters” (ရွာစား *rvā cāh*), village headpersons, and local abbots in the confluent histories of what is now known as “Burma,” yet in the past, a sufficiently powerful king might be able to disrobe, flog, or kill those monks who opposed him or his monastic representatives, superimposing a reluctant obedience at least as far as the walls, tax collectors, and armies of his capital city could reach. The British also tried to exercise this corporeal control over monks, starting with suppressing decades of resistance against their occupation in 1885 through occupying armies, then later attempting to deter undesirable monastic behavior through educational reform and incentivize desirable behavior through the promise of state patronage with Pali exams or honorific titles. Yet the U Nu administration in the Parliamentary period did not have the consolidated martial forces, economic resources, or ruling mandate necessary to manipulate the bodies of monks in this way, exemplified by the frequent, often violent protests against government legislation and civil institutions by monastic groups and their followers.

Indeed, U Nu was always about to lose what little control he had over the bodies and behaviours of monks, the national economy, and the borders of the union, all reflecting his tenuous mandate and the fragility of the nascent nation state. Schober even claims that under U Nu, it was “ultimately the loss of the state’s control over the monks” that in the end “contribut[ed] to its collapse” (Schober 2011, 77). Hence as a strategy to restrain the *saṅgha*, U Nu attempted to commandeer the texts that grounded their doctrine and discipline, just like the Konbaung kings before him. His project, in fact, was nothing less than the superimposition of a “canon” on a loose set of texts, some of which were Pali, some of which were in the vernacular, in the sense of the “exclusive canon” discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation. While scholars in Buddhist Studies argue about the nature of the “Tipiṭaka” (S. Tripiṭaka) as either a normative idea and cultural system (Collins 1990), as involving both formal and practical aspects (Blackburn 1999), or as an “all-embracing and comprehensive inclusive Tripiṭaka” (Skilling 2022, 315), it is clear that U Nu and the monastic establishment he supported had a very specific notion of the Tipiṭaka in mind, a canon *de jure* where the borders were clearly defined and closely guarded. Such strict dominion over what counts as a canonical text was a major motivating factor in holding the Sixth Council, for once there existed a stable and closed canon stipulated down to the word level, it would be possible to adjudicate erroneous or even supposedly heretical interpretations that arose, both in terms of monastic discipline (*vinaya*) and doctrine (*dhamma*). This fact becomes especially clear in the resurrected monastic courts system under the SLORC and its predecessor, the State Peace and Development Council (နိုင်ငံတော်အေးချမ်းသာယာရေးနှင့်ဖွံ့ဖြိုးရေးကောင်စီ *nuiṅ ṇaṃ tau aeh khyamḥ sā yā reḥ nhaṅ. phvaṃ. phruih reḥ koṅ cī*, 1997-2011), as in all the cases, “only Pali canonical and commentarial texts are judged to be valid criteria for assessing what is right and wrong” (Janaka Ashin 2016,

233). It is thus necessary to view the Sixth Council and the Vinicchaya Ṭhāna Act as working in tandem, to first stabilize and standardise U Nu's conception of the canon, then to use this monolithic and immutable corpus to prosecute those whose views go against the monastic hegemon and threaten Buddhist unity.

One cannot use the exclusive canon alone to “edit” the bodies of monks, no matter how closely it is guarded, for it is the commentaries to the canon that seal it in the first place, especially the *aṭṭhakathās*. *Aṭṭhakathās* do so by supplying and delineating the meaning of the words, clarifying the contours of doctrinal concepts, and connecting them together by defining their place in the larger superstructure of Buddhist morality, cosmology, and soteriology. The result is that commentaries, especially *aṭṭhakathā*, take the potentialities of a looser conception of a Tipiṭaka and “actuate[s] them in discourse,” thereby “underpin[ing] and rationalis[ing] some specific way of acting” and, I might add, a specific way of thinking (Kahrs 1998, 6) (italics in original). A major part of this actualizing work by commentaries is, in fact, preclusion, excluding alternative possibilities and foreclosing on specific ways of acting and thinking. In a word then, commentaries are the means by which a Tipiṭaka is *closed* and made to be exclusive, in tandem with councils, printing runs, state examination systems, and critical dictionaries. It is thus not surprising that in the modern history of *vinicchaya* cases adjudicated by monastic courts, “commentarial works have more significance for the discussion than canonical works” (Janaka Ashin 2016, 233). The significance of commentarial works arises because any nuance or equivocation in a loose Tipiṭaka is narrowed and mitigated by exegesis, making it possible to render a single judgement that leaves minimal space for appeal or dissent. For this reason, “alternative [...] commentarial readings noted by scholars are not brought into the discussion as the body of literature is assumed to be monolithic” by monastic court judges (Janaka Ashin 2016,

233). Allowing a text like the Mil-a to enter into the sphere of juridical precedence would certainly reopen the range of acceptable thought and action, offering possible defendants an alternative authoritative source on which to build their case and legitimize their supposedly subversive views or aberrant behaviour. Even if we forget about monastic courts and consider what is at stake in Pali exams, the same kind of centrifugal force is at play if the Mil-a is allowed to stand, threatening to undermine the established order and tear asunder the centre. Hence, “as the era of the modern nation-state approaches, monastic and state actors collaborate (deliberately or unwittingly) in a process of further defining the proper practices and interpretations of Buddhist monastic law, thereby narrowing the spaces and opportunities for hermeneutical fluidity” (Schonthal 2018, 2). The Mil-a represented such “hermeneutical fluidity” to the independence government in the middle of the last century, meaning it was anathema to the Buddhist Revival project, the religious-based unity envisioned by U Nu, and the project to turn the Tipiṭaka into an exclusive canon *de jure*.

Unmasking the Neoconservative Façade

Such an exclusive canon *de jure*, however, was only ever an ideal, dialectical in nature: for the exclusive canon forged by the Fifth and especially the Sixth Council, reinforced by the printing of these texts, enforced by the Pali examination system, and maintained by the *Tipiṭaka abhidhān*, contains the seeds of its own destruction. This self-contradiction stems from the fact that as soon as the parameters of the exclusive canon envisioned by U Nu and the monastic hierarchy were strictly defined and literally set in stone, this self-contained concept of the canon became binary, demanding that any middle ground be excised from the corpus when taken as a whole. Yet the looser concept of the Tipiṭaka, which includes not only the Vinayaṭiṭaka,

Suttapiṭaka, and Abhidhammapiṭaka, but the *aṭṭhakathās* necessary for its proper functioning, contains many texts that not only permit of indeterminacy, but actively promote it. The quintessential case in point is the Mil, not least because there does not exist a singular, linear recension of this text in Southeast Asia, as Eng Jin Ooi has demonstrated for Thailand (Eng Jin Ooi 2021). As the multiple recensions of this text show, the Mil is not a “closed system” emerging intact from an unadulterated lineage existing outside of the vagaries of textual production and revision. Rather, what Skilling notes about the Siamese Tipiṭaka is also true for the Mil, namely, that “it has never been inert; active and interactive, it has developed in contact and collision” (Skilling 2014, 362). In this case, the constant “contact and collision” includes the Mil adapting to the epistemologies of different schools of Buddhism as it circulated in South and East Asia, its translation into multiple languages and local idioms as it spread as either an integrated or disaggregated set of texts, the various ways it was used to justify the actions of changing courts and rulers in Southeast Asia, accommodating itself to scientific discourses or inter-religious debates in places like Sri Lanka and Thailand, and most importantly for the present discussion, there is the contact and collision between the Mil and its different forms of exegesis, including the Mil-a. The relationship between a root text and its commentary is both complementary and adversarial, as the commentary reinforces ideas in the root but also challenges conventional interpretations and injects new themes and concepts into the system. It can thus be more productive, as Laurie Patton argues, to focus not on “commentary’s auxiliary relationship to canon and examine instead commentary’s *competition with canon*” (Patton 1977, 18) (italics in original). It is more productive to take this perspective because a commentary like the Mil-a is always on the verge of usurping the legitimacy of the root text while reaffirming that

same legitimacy, and indeed, it is this very cannibalistic tension that leads to the creative possibilities of the Pali commentarial project.

Such creative possibilities, I have shown, are partly the result of the presence and play of the *abhiññās*. As the basis for the epistemology of the Pali commentarial project, at least as this project is manifest in the Mil-a, the *abhiññās* make soteriological claims about the state and vitality of the *sāsana*, claims which unleash a politically charged and cascading set of consequences for lay-monastic relations, monastic court systems, lineage hierarchies, and the ability of the state to control or censor new texts. Any governing body looking to police the possible, then, must immediately confront invocations of the *abhiññās* as found in the Mil-a before they coalesce into an alternative seat of authority that threatens to overwhelm the centre, even if only in terms of new commentarial production and circulation. Indeed, this is what we have seen time and again in Burmese and Southeast Asian history, with royal edicts or colonial commands prohibiting monks or their followers from arrogating for themselves attainments promised in the Tipiṭaka. The anxieties of ruling elites became even further heightened in the twentieth century, when such attainments flew in the face of an encroaching scientific positivism that represented the *abhiññās* not as forces of nature, but as fantastical superstitions representing the backwardness of Buddhism in Asia. But even if they were believed to be fantasies, the *abhiññās* remained potent sites of political organization and agitation. Hansen, for instance, explains that in the early decades of the twentieth century, Khmer monks were under heavy surveillance by French colonial authorities wary of millenarian movements for any demonstration or even insinuation of the *abhiññās* (Hansen 2007, 112), while Crosby points to a royal edict in Cambodia from 1920, which prohibits monks

from making out that they had acquired attainments such as *Jhāna* [higher states of meditative absorption], *Vimokkha* [liberation], *Samādhi* [meditative concentration],

Sampat [attainments], *Magga* [the four paths of supramundane achievements that culminate in arhatship], *Phala* [the four fruits of supramundane achievements that culminate in arhatship]. (Crosby 2020, 195).

Crosby emphasizes that the categories and concepts outlined in this edict “are remarkable for their orthodoxy—all the attainments listed are to be found in the *Vism* and *Abhidhamma* accounts of the spiritual path, the very sources that were authoritative for reform Buddhists” like the *Mingun Jetavana* (Crosby 2020, 197). Indeed, the above list issued by the Cambodian court under French control mirrors almost verbatim the attainments referenced by the *Mingun Jetavana* multiple times throughout his commentary, and since the problem was not the orthodoxy of these attainments nor the fact that they originated from outside the *Tipiṭaka*, the controversy surrounding the *Mil-a* must not have been sparked solely by the nature or content of the reforms he promoted. Instead, it becomes clear that the uproar over the *Mil-a* also concerned the identity of the monk proposing these reforms and the way his reforms were legitimized. The fact that the *Mingun Jetavana*, considered by many to be a living *arahant*, made these claims about female ordination, that he delivered his claims in the prestige language of Pali, that he couched his reforms in the authority of the *aṭṭhakathā* genre, and especially the fact that he used the *abhiññās* to do so, is what made his commentary so audacious and destabilizing to the U Nu administration and the mid-century monastic hierarchy.

As Pranke explains the situation during the end of the Konbaung dynasty, “given that the charisma of Burmese kingship was defined in Buddhist terms,” a fact which largely held for the first independence government as well, “having lay subjects roam about the kingdom claiming to be *ariya sotāpannas* and *anāgāmīs* might have been perceived as a political threat – especially at a time when the Burmese monarchy was enfeebled and pressured from all sides” (Pranke 2010, 457). While the U Nu administration was able to confiscate copies of the *Mil-a* after it was

published, they too were “enfeebled and pressured from all sides.” The Mingun Jetavana’s affirmative claims about the *abhiññās* may have likewise been threatening, but perhaps the U Nu administration was unable or did not calculate it as in their electoral interest to outright ban declarative statements of these powers in Burma. What made the problem especially intractable for U Nu was that these statements about the *abhiññās* were being made not by a group of *weikzas* or by a fringe millenarian leader, but by a founding figure of “pure” *vipassanā* whose lineage the administration was supplicating with heavy state support. In contrast, though the subsequent military government did not outright sponsor but was tolerant of the *vipassanā* reform movement, “it was not pleased with the unorthodox concentration meditator whose aspirations to power introduce[d] an element of political instability” into the system (Houtman 1990b, 184). We should be careful not to reproduce the categories of “orthodox” and “unorthodox” invoked by Houtman here, as the *abhiññās* are just as orthodox if not more so than the fruits of *vipassanā* practice, but his point remains, that invocations of or even aspirations toward the *abhiññās* “introduce an element of political instability” into Burmese society, so much so that some practitioners of *samatha* meditation were arrested during military rule in Burma, while “the powers derived from concentration meditation—such as those of flight and transformation—are censored from Burmese films” (Houtman 1990b, 184). Imagine how much more destabilizing the invocation of the *abhiññās* were in an *aṭṭhakathā* commentary composed in Pali by a supposed living *arahant*, someone who was a founding figure in the modern reform movement of *vipassanā* then gaining political ascendancy in mid-century Burma? What makes the case of the Mingun Jetavana unique, however, is that he is not declaring himself in possession of the *abhiññās*, only claiming that they are at present possible in principle and practice, meaning they cannot be outright dismissed by an authority simultaneously forging an

exclusive canon featuring the *abhiññās* as part of its core soteriological infrastructure. Based on their mere possibility alone, the *abhiññās* animate and authorize the Mingun Jetavana's commentary and his calls for reform. Indeed, their role in the Mil-a legitimizes them much more among the laity than any film or narrative story ever could. Figuratively speaking then, with its epistemological basis of the *abhiññās*, the Mil-a functioned as a sort of millenarian figurehead claiming supernatural powers and locating its mission against the state in the Buddha's knowledge of the future. In this extended metaphor, the Mil-a amassed an army of Pali phonemes, a phalanx of orthodox definitions, intertextual scriptures-turned-rebels, a flank of meditation theory, and battle flags of soteriological possibilities against any establishment or government that would dare oppose its competing vision of religious authority.

In many ways, this commentary is potentially more destabilizing than an actual millenarian leader, because while the state and its enforcers can imprison or kill an individual, a commentary like the Mil-a is much more elusive and resilient. As I pointed out above, its resilience is partly due to the nature of its author, considered a living *arahant* and revered as a founding figure of the *vipassanā* reform movement. Its resilience is also partly due to the inclusion of the Mil in the exclusive canon during the Fifth and Sixth Councils, a process of negotiation outlined in Chapter One, thereby opening the door to someone like the Mingun Jetavana to compose its first-known *aṭṭhakathā* commentary. Yet in a more subtle and perhaps problematic sense for the U Nu administration creating this exclusive canon, the lack of an *aṭṭhakathā* commentary to the Mil meant that this text never reached what Ganeri terms “a reflective equilibrium,” whereby a given interpretive substratum coalesces around a root text, acting if not to suppress all competing interpretations, then to assimilate opposing views into this substratum and mitigate challenges to its predominance (Ganeri 2010, 188). Without this

equilibrium, the dynamic between the root text and the Mingun Jetavana's *aṭṭhakathā* makes the Mil the potential site for ongoing literary and exegetical innovation and agitation. Hence while the Mil-a has not been accepted by many in Burma as a legitimate *aṭṭhakathā* since its publication, being suppressed by the highest levels of government, its very presence leaves open the possibility of generating its own subcommentary, bilingual *nissaya*, full vernacular translation, translation into other languages, a handbook, meditation manuals, or scholarly interest outside of Burma, like the work of Bollée, Deshpande, Mizuno, Huxley, and my own contribution here. Each installment in this intertextual unfolding invites a degree of interpretative slippage that adds to or alters the root text in unpredictable ways. Perhaps the Mil-a's very rejection has added a further element of unpredictability, for had it been accepted as part of the Sixth Council, this sanction would at least have partially foreclosed the possibility of someone writing a new, competing *aṭṭhakathā* meant to supplant it. Surely without this rejection and the ensuing controversy, I would not have analyzed this text at the centre of my dissertation, thereby bringing it into further spotlight in the field of Buddhist Studies. And though it seems unlikely given the suppression the Mingun Jetavana's commentary has been subjected to over the past 75 years, it is also possible this *aṭṭhakathā* could be absorbed and incorporated into the Mil in the future, leading to the formation of new recensions, textual communities, and further commentarial elaboration.

With all these unpredictable possibilities and potential intertextual pathways, the Mil should be understood as an unfinished and still-unfolding project, an ongoing discursive process (in no particular order) of debate, rejection, affirmation, negotiation, and accommodation that the Mingun Jetavana is further driving with his Mil-a. Horner captures this dynamic sense of the root text when she writes that the word "final [...]" is no doubt an inappropriate term to use in

connection with [the] *Milindapañha*” (Horner 1963, liv). Skilling says something similar when he argues that instead of seeing one Mil, we need to recognize that there are in fact “many *Milindas*” that have circulated in South and Southeast Asia (Skilling 2010, 13), not to mention its recensions in other languages. It also must be admitted that this dissertation is yet another installment in the intertextual history of the Mil(s), both translating the text and its reception into an academic register and drawing out the stakes of its commentary in a way meaningful to people outside of Burma and beyond the early-twentieth-century ethos that I have discussed in these pages. This current work then, a type of subcommentary or *abhinavaṭīkā* in its own right, would be impossible without the Mil-a as impetus. With all this in mind, the Mil is perhaps the text most unfit to act as the “brick wall” of the exclusive canon that U Nu was trying to create, unmasking by its very presence the fantasy of the project to make a monolithic, closed corpus of texts that were unambiguous and stable. This is what I mean by the exclusive canon-making project containing the seeds of its own destruction. For by backing this project as part of the Buddhist Revival program, the U Nu government and mid-century monastic hierarchy have codified this fantasy into unbending law, further highlighting the self-defeating dialectics of an exclusive canon when this rigid law meets the fluid reality of how Buddhist practice and discipline is actually negotiated and applied, such as in the case of women practicing *vipassanā* meditation. For as Schonthal says about the Vinayaṭīka in Sri Lanka, “[l]itigation and other practices of contemporary public law bring into view not one coherent vision of the Vinaya, but many visions, each of which stress different aspects of it: Pātimokkha versus Khandhakas, canon versus commentary, manuscript traditions versus customary norms, Pāli Vinaya Piṭaka versus Sinhala *katikāvata*” (Schonthal 2018, 35–36). To this list we might also add, the soteriological potential of *vipassanā* and the non-existence of the *bhikkhunī-upasampadā*. The irony, therefore,

is that “[r]ather than pushing Buddhism towards interpretive stability, our contemporary legal institutions might also be pushing towards heterogeneity” (Schonthal 2018, 37). The same is true, therefore, of the exclusive canon *de jure*, for the result of the collision between the Buddhist Revival and the authority of the Mingun Jetavana, between the *aṭṭhakathā* and its root text, and between this dissertation and the Mil-a, is not only the unmasking of the façade that is the exclusive canon, but of the neoconservative project which relies on the literalist interpretation of a singular, closed canon to the exclusion of all other voices and texts. This fundamentalist, ultraorthodox vision of Theravada Buddhism predominant in Burma might hold for some time at the centre and under a strong centralized government, but it is always and from the very start in the process of unravelling at the margins, policed as it is by an unfinished text like the Mil and its controversial *aṭṭhakathā* commentary.

The most powerful force identified in this dissertation is thus not the possibility of the *abhiññās*, not the modern reform movement of *vipassanā*, not the transformation of women’s role in the *sāsana*, not even the Buddhist biopolitics of the U Nu administration. Instead, it is the recursive power of commentary. For commentaries do not define meaning so much as disclose and release it. Rather than close meaning off as something alienated and terminal, they render it open to be further rendered and manipulated according to competing agendas and visions of religious authority. In other words, commentaries are never final, but generate commentaries on commentaries on commentaries... The question for society is who has the power to define and disclose, and according to the Pali commentarial project, it is the commentator, especially the author of an *aṭṭhakathā*. It is thus not so much the premodern but the recursive power of commentary that the Mingun Jetavana unleashed with his Mil-a, and it is this legacy which may outlast his sacred biography, his repertoire of writings, his practice lineage, his now worldwide

satipaṭṭhāna method, his broader soteriological project, and almost certainly, the predominance of neoconservative Buddhism in Burma.

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